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The Sensuous Order, Faith and Love in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens

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THE SENSUOUS ORDER, FAITH, AND LOVE IN THE POETRY OF WALLACE STEVENS

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to show Wallace Stevens' intense valuation of the sensuous order of the universe through discussions of his various works and their criticism. Also, the love themes and spiritual convictions which result from the poet's emphasis upon the things of this world will be explored. The love theme especially has not received the attention it deserves from critics, and when properly recognized, it adds important dimension to the pattern of Stevens' themes.

Chapter I of the thesis will be devoted to a discussion of Stevens' preoccupation with the physical world. Chapter II will treat Stevens' spiritual point of view, the attitudes which constitute the closest thing to faith in the religious sense. His spirituality often is indirectly stated and turns largely upon his belief (declared in "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour") that "God and the imagination are one." Chapter III will concentrate on the love theme in the poet's works, declared in such typical phrases as ". . . gusty emotions on wet roads on autumn nights," and ". . . next in glory to enduring love," from "Sunday Morning." This third chapter will include discussions of such poems as "O Florida, Venereal Soil" and

"Infanta Marina," two examples of many poems found which contain major instances of the love theme. Love is connected with a pervasive metaphor of "she" in many poems, "she" often representing the poet's affection for feminized physical realities such as the land and the sea. "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," in some ways the key Stevens poem, contains such significant remarks as this: "Say next to holiness is the will thereto, / And next to love is the desire for love, / The desire for its celestial ease in the heart." The love theme is indeed a major one for Stevens, and it needs to be explored.

I have made the chapter on love my last chapter because it contains the most original aspect of my study. Critics seldom consider Stevens a love poet, and I hope to show that such an oversight is an injustice. I hope to prove that the love theme is a significant and important aspect of his treatment of the sensuous order. Of course I do not mean to imply that Chapter II, on the principle of faith in Stevens, is without originality. The atheism of Stevens has caused most critics to play down unfairly the spirituality he often asserts. His atheism is of the sort that is intended to be a comforting replacement for orthodoxy, and I hope to show that his faith is often very close to genuine religiosity, and that criticism should take note of that closeness. A generous number of his

poems will be canvassed in my study, and a generous amount of critical commentary also. The prose and letters of Stevens will not be ignored either in this investigation of some of the poet's major themes.

CHAPTER I

STEVENS AND THE SENSUOUS ORDER

"The greatest poverty is not to live / In a physical world,"[1] says Wallace Stevens in "Esthetique du Mal," a poem in which he celebrates the human condition. These are words from a mind whose owner worshipped the earth as his primary source for poetic inspiration. These words typify Stevens as a person who was keenly aware of what his senses could teach him. Between "this dividing and indifferent blue" of the sky and the "barque of phosphor / On the palmy beach" lies his philosophy of poetry. "A theory of poetry is identical with a theory of life"[2] C. Roland Wagner says about Stevens' work, a statement which minimizes any formal influences upon him that critics may assume. "If there are any literary relations between my things and those of other writers, they are unconscious," Stevens once wrote in a letter, adding in another one this remark: "It seems that a poetic order

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[1]Wallace Stevens, "Esthetique du Mal," in The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955), p. 325. All references to Stevens' poetry are taken from The Collected Poems, unless noted otherwise.

[2]C. Roland Wagner, "A Central Poetry," in Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. by Marie Borroff (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1963), p. 71.

is potentially as significant as a philosophic order . . . [a poetic theory] does what poetry itself does . . . it leads to a fresh conception of the world."[3]

James Baird is a critic who adheres to the poet's wishes concerning his poetic philosophy when he says: "I very much doubt that he saw any system--Platonic, Cartesian, Berkeleyan, Hegelian, or existentialist--as having any power of sovereignty over his own sense of the world."[4] Daniel Fuchs is certain there is no Platonic influence in Stevens' work when he says that Stevens believes Plato's thought to be the kind which "falsifies experience" since everything is based on thought.[5] Fuchs says that Stevens' poetry is the "ultimate Plato because it creates an order from the intricacies of appearance."[6]

It is the preoccupation with his world that comprises the center of Wallace Stevens' theory of poetry. Thematically, the world exists as a basis for any theoretical propositions which are set forth in his poems. "A most attractive idea to me is the idea that we are all

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[3]Wallace Stevens, letter to Ronald Lane Latimer, Nov. 5, 1935, in Letters of Wallace Stevens, ed. by Holly Stevens (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), pp. 290, 590.

[4]James Baird, The Dome and The Rock: Structure in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1968), p. xv.

[5]Daniel Fuchs, The Comic Spirit of Wallace Stevens (Durham: Duke University Press, 1963), p. 121.

[6]Ibid., p. 135.

the merest biological mechanisms,"[7] he wrote to Ronald Latimer, denying further any affiliations with schools of philosophy. In turn, however, Randall Jarrell says that "Stevens is never more philosophical, abstract, rational, than when telling us to put our faith in nothing but immediate sensations, perceptions, aesthetic particulars . . ." and Jarrell says Stevens' poetry is "an exercise in viewing the world."[8] Morton Zabel says Stevens' verse is sensory and symbolic--as extravagant as Dylan Thomas's "mounting festivals of the senses," that his poems "describe a continuous vitality of the senses; their imagery of aesthetic fastidiousness, tropical splendor and privileged taste abounds on the page. It is a world of high living and indulgent pleasure. . . ."[9]

Frank Doggett is a critic who has much to say of this poet of the senses:

> When making a comparison between the mind and the senses . . . Stevens usually puts his final trust in sentience. He is governed by the inherent bias of the poet for the body's faith in the palpable certainty of the world of immediate experience.[10]

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[7]Stevens, letter to Ronald Lane Latimer, Nov. 15, 1935, in Letters, p. 294.

[8]Randall Jarrell, "Reflections on Wallace Stevens," Partisan Review, XVIII (May, June, 1951), 341.

[9]Morton Dauwen Zabel, "Wallace Stevens and the Image of Man," in Borroff, Critical Essays, p. 154.

[10]Frank Doggett, Stevens' Poetry of Thought (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1966), p. 142.

In the collection of essays The Act of the Mind, Bernard Heringman stresses that for Stevens the imagination shows a truth that the poet recognizes by sensation.[11] Without a borrowed system of philosophy, Stevens creates his own by relying entirely on individual experience. Of course his poetry is not merely sensory and physical. In a journal entry he writes: "Art all alone, detached, sensuous for the sake of sensuousness, not to perpetuate inspiration or thought--seems to . . . be the most . . . inexcusable rubbish."[12]

What he does in his poetry is to cooperate between his imagination and sensibility. For example, Stevens wrote to his wife before their marriage that "life is a very, very thin affair except for the feelings."[13] He reduces the cognitive function to a secondary level, Frank Lentricchia notes in his study of Stevens' language. He says: "The stuff of knowledge is the stuff of external reality."[14] The combination, then, of Stevens' ideas and

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[11]Bernard Heringman, "Wallace Stevens: The Use of Poetry," in The Act of the Mind, ed. by Roy Harvey Pearce and J. Hillis Miller (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1966), p. 5.

[12]Stevens, from his Journal, March 28, 1899, in The Letters, p. 124.

[13]Stevens, letter to Elsie Moll, 1907-08, ibid., p. 108.

[14]Frank Lentricchia, Jr., The Gaiety of Language: An Essay on the Radical Poetics of W. B. Yeats and Wallace Stevens (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), p. 123.

feelings creates a sensuous order in his art. Doggett says: "The world exists only within the mind, and yet the mind exists only within the world."[15]

Stevens wrote poetry in which he used his imagination to record sensory perceptions much in the same manner as an impressionist painter. Lentricchia believes that the poet's techniques are very similar to those used by the nineteenth-century painters when he says: "Stevens is not a secretary of the world of fact, but, like Yeats, strung between two worlds."[16] Remembering that a partnership exists between Stevens' mind and his world, though the physical self plays a large role in determining what goes into a Stevens poem, it is the world of his imagination which orders and produces sensory perceptions as poetry.

Herbert J. Stern believes that the imagination of Stevens has, as its foundation, physical reality.[17] What is real and what is known are thus the ordering principles in Stevens' poetry. Robert Pack is another critic who believes the "sensual" element in Stevens' poetry is its ordering principle.[18] "The spirit comes from the body of

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[15]Doggett, Stevens' Poetry, p. 4.

[16]Frank Lentricchia, Jr., "Wallace Stevens: The Ironic Eye," Yale Review, LVI (March, 1967), 345.

[17]Herbert J. Stern, Wallace Stevens' Art of Uncertainty (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1966), p. 6.

[18]Robert Pack, Wallace Stevens: An Approach to His Poetry and Thought (New York: Gordian Press, 1968), p. 169.

the world,"[19] says Eugene Paul Nassar, in his book on Stevens' figures of order. This critic deals to a great extent with Stevens' use of physical objects, and for his solid comments on them, he will be quoted extensively in this chapter. Stevens' physical world in his poetry cannot be overstressed, as it is the beginning and the end of his poetic process. The imagination functions as the creative instrument for transforming the universe into poetry. The imagination is Stevens' monocle by which he examines the sensuous world and orders it into poetry.

That Stevens is overcome by "the awesome power of environment"[20] is noted by William Van O'Connor, whose book, The Shaping Spirit, suggests his interest in the role played by Stevens' imagination in his poetry. And Pack notes Stevens' words: "The soul . . . is composed / Of the external world"; or as the poet says another way: "I Am what is around me."[21]

In his article on Stevens' "Ironic Eye," Lentricchia believes that Stevens' poetry is the "epistemological drama

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[19]Stevens, "Looking Across the Fields and Watching the Birds Fly," in The Collected Poems, p. 519, as quoted in Eugene Paul Nassar, Wallace Stevens: An Anatomy of Figuration (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1965), p. 26.

[20]William Van O'Connor, The Shaping Spirit: A Study of Wallace Stevens (New York: Russell and Russell, Inc., 1964), p. 24.

[21]Stevens, "Anecdote of Men by the Thousand," Collected Poems, p. 51, as quoted in Pack, Wallace Stevens, p. 64; "Theory," Collected Poems, p. 86.

of perceiver and perceived."[22] Frank Doggett, on the relation of Stevens' self and world, says: "Like Narcissus discovering himself in the mirror of the pool, the human self sees his humanity reflected in the world around him."[23] "Poetry is a renovation of experience,"[24] says the poet, which involves the human self in cooperation with his physical environment.

The human element in the physical world comprises the center of Stevens' interest in the sensuous order. Doggett once called Stevens "the poet of the earth," a title Jarrell also believes is fitting when he says: "Setting out on Stevens for the first time would be like setting out to be an explorer of the earth." He adds, "His best poems are the poetry of a man fully human--of someone sympathetic, magnanimous--the poems see, feel, and think with equal success; they treat with mastery."[25]

For Stevens, then, poetry becomes "a part of the structure of reality,"[26] having it as its source, and

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[22]Lentricchia, "The Ironic Eye," pp. 338-339.

[23]Doggett, Stevens' Poetry, p. 21.

[24]Stevens, "Adagia," in Opus Posthumous (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957), p. 177, as quoted in Fuchs, The Comic Spirit, p. 164.

[25]Jarrell, "A Review of Wallace Stevens' Poetry," 1955, as quoted in Baird, The Dome, p. ix, and Jarrell, "Reflections on Wallace Stevens," p. 343.

[26]Wallace Stevens, "Three Academic Pieces I," in Borroff, Critical Essays, p. 29.

depending upon the self in relation to it. Richard A. Macksey calls Stevens "the inquisitor of the structure of reality,"[27] noting that by inquiring into the natures of things, he comes up with his own version of the world. As Stevens says in The Necessary Angel: "Poetry is a satisfying of the desire for resemblance."[28] Robert Pack says of Stevens as inquisitor that "He titillates our sense into that heightened activity of acute consciousness, and from this consciousness emerges an understanding of reality as a unified structure of correspondences and resemblances."[29] To understand what he is trying to do in his poetry, then, one must do what O'Connor suggests in dealing with Stevens' poetry:

> . . . we have to slough off the cliché forms, get rid of the habit of forcing all knowledge into neatly rational patterns and admit the transforming and ennobling power of the imagination. We must create new forms, new metaphors, new myths in order to experience without distortion the world as "idea" and the world as "body."[30]

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[27]Richard A. Macksey, "The Climates of Wallace Stevens," in Pearce and Miller, Act of the Mind, p. 190.

[28]Stevens, The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination (New York, 1951), p. 77, as quoted in Stern, Art of Uncertainty, p. 133.

[29]Pack, An Approach, p. 54.

[30]O'Connor, The Shaping Spirit, p. 30.

Stevens has been established as a poet of the physical world, but so far the evidences have not touched upon one great sensuous element in his poetry: his conception of the world as a woman. Frank Doggett gives the best account of Stevens' relationship to the world, which he says Stevens views as one would a woman's body. He says that reality is thought of by Stevens as a woman, and she is one of two kinds: either mother or beloved.[31] Poetry represents "the voluptuousness of looking" that a woman also evokes. The metaphor of "she," then, adds great dimension to Stevens' conception of the sensuous order. William Burney points out that women are central characters in much of Stevens' early poetry: in "Sunday Morning" the chief character is a woman; Susanna at her bath is a representative of the sensuous order, while she is also the instrument of the poet's sophisticated spoof of Old Testament doctrine. "In the Carolinas" makes reference to a woman's "aspic nipples," and in "To the One of Fictive Music," she is a muse.[32]

The woman in Stevens' poetry acts as a symbol of the earth, the procreative figure of order who keeps it in motion. She is an important part of Stevens' poetry of physical reality, and she is the sensual goddess of

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[31]Doggett, Stevens' Poetry, p. 39.

[32]William Burney, Wallace Stevens (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1968), pp. 37-47.

his poetic form. Nassar also believes the woman in Stevens' poetry stands as a reality symbol.[33] Doggett reminds one, however, that she is never an individual, except in a very few instances, such as Susanna in "Peter Quince at the Clavier." She is most important as a primary figure in Stevens' mythology of the natural world.[34] The most beautiful example of the metaphor of "she" is illustrated in Stevens' poem "The Idea of Order at Key West":

> The sea was not a mask. No more was she.
> The song and water were not medleyed sound
> Even if what she sang was what she heard.
> Since what she sang was uttered word by word.

She is reality, and the world is ordered by her singing:

> . . . there never was a world for her
> Except the one she sang and, singing made.

It is essential to note the order in which Stevens' poems are arranged in his Collected Poems in discussing his version of the sensuous order. Roy Harvey Pearce believes that the poet's first book of poems, Harmonium, seems to be his most successful accumulation of sensuous poetry.[35] He represents a number of critics who agree.[36] Pearce

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[33]Nassar, An Anatomy, p. 94.

[34]Doggett, Stevens' Poetry, p. 45.

[35]Pearce, "Wallace Stevens: The Life of the Imagination," in Borroff, Critical Essays, p. 112.

[36]Two others are: Northrop Frye, "The Realistic Oriole: A Study of Wallace Stevens," in Borroff, Critical Essays, p. 174, and Michael Benamou, "The Symbolist Imagination," in Pearce and Miller, Act of the Mind, p. 113.

says that central in Harmonium, consisting of eighty-five poems, is "an awareness of . . . reality. . . ." The driving concern of these poems is with the sensuously flowing aspect of reality. . . ."[37]

Ronald Sukenick is a critic who discusses several of Stevens' poems which he believes do not stress physical reality in Harmonium, a work which, as a whole, represents a youthful sensuousness. Some of the poems which are the exceptions are "The Comedian as the Letter C" with its sea imagery, "The Snow Man" with its "infinitude," and "Domination of Black," with lack of color. However, by accepting the sort of chaos they represent, Sukenick says one can enjoy them in a sensuous manner. He illustrates how they can be enjoyed by quoting a poem from the section Parts of a World, "The Latest Freed Man": ". . . having just / Escaped from the truth, the morning is color and mist, which is enough."[38]

Michael Benamou notes that there are several changes in symbols from Harmonium to Stevens' second section in his Collected Poems, Ideas of Order. Synecdoches of the

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[37]Pearce, "The Life," in Boroff, Critical Essays, p. 112.

[38]Stevens, "The Latest Freed Man," Collected Poems, p. 204, as quoted in Ronald Sukenick, Wallace Stevens: Musing the Obscure (New York: New York University Press, 1967), pp. 9, 10.

world, "night, the south, moon, woman, vegetation, summer, nature, music, must give way to the masculine constellation of day, north, men, mud, winter, society, and violence," Benamou says.[39] These will be discussed in detail later. They all remain in the sensuous order, however, and Stern points out that at one time, Stevens wanted to call his collected works The Whole of Harmonium, showing that the stress on the sensuous order prevails throughout his poetry. It is something that has always preoccupied students of Stevens; Stern says: "Early critics were almost universal in their preoccupation with the sensuousness of music and imagery, the delicacy, . . . of the shaping imagination."[40]

Benamou says Stevens' second section, Ideas of Order, is "largely a book of nudes and beautiful barenesses, the book of bare, unpoetic reality."[41] However, what Stevens is doing in this section is putting into place the world he has created in Harmonium. In a letter to Ronald Latimer, Stevens once discussed how he felt about order:

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[39]Benamou, "The Symbolist Imagination," in Pearce and Miller, Act of the Mind, p. 94.

[40]Stern, Art of Uncertainty, pp. 2, 3, 6.

[41]Benamou, "The Symbolist," in Pearce, The Act, p. 113.

> I do very much have a dislike of disorder. One of the first things I do when I get home at night is to make people take things off the radiator tops. . . . Of course, all sorts of people do the same thing, even in their thoughts. I do confess to a dislike of all that.[42]

He does not lose his sensuality in Ideas of Order. He is merely cleaning off the radiator tops. In "The Idea of Order at Key West," the poet says: "Oh! Blessed rage for order, pale Ramon, / The Maker's rage to order words of the sea."

Pearce says Ideas of Order illustrates "a man trying to understand his involvement in the war between reality and the imagination," while later, he says Parts of a World represents "a kind of resting-place and occasion for self-assessment."[43] Stevens' poetic housecleaning between the period of Harmonium and Ideas of Order, through the subjective world of The Man with the Blue Guitar, produces a return to the sensuous, Benamou admits, as Parts of a World becomes "the book of heroic nakedness."[44] William Burney sums up best what has happened up through Parts of a World to Stevens' ideas of the sensuous order: "'Poems of Our

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[42]Stevens, letter to Ronald Lane Latimer, Dec. 10, 1935, in The Letters, p. 300.

[43]Pearce, "The Life," in Borroff, Critical Essays, p. 117, and "Wallace Stevens: The Last Lesson of the Master," in The Act, p. 121.

[44]Benamou, "The Symbolist," in Pearce and Miller, The Act, p. 113.

Climate' contains . . . both an intellectual and a sensuous sense of the conflict with chaos which emerges and engages the whole man."[45] As Stevens puts it,

> There would still remain the never-resting mind,
> So that one would want to escape, come back
> To what had been so long composed.
> The imperfect is our paradise.

Morton Zabel explains the progression of Stevens' poetry by saying that essentially what the poet has done in the books following Harmonium is to move "out of sensory realism toward speculative formulation, and so toward abstraction: out of the vividness and immediacy of imagistic statement toward conceptual definition and certitude."[46] That is not to say that the physical is absent from Stevens' later poetry, for it must be kept in mind that the sensuous always forms the basis of his poetic theory. Without messages received from the world of objects, Stevens would not have poetry. In Samuel French Morse's critical summary of comments upon Stevens' work, which he considers the poet's biography, he recalls a good comparison Roy Harvey Pearce makes between Stevens and Henry James in their literary advancement. First, early in his book, Morse points out that Stevens and James have similar purposes since both equate life with art, but even more, they both

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[45] Burney, Wallace Stevens, p. 97.

[46] Zabel, "Wallace Stevens and the Image of Man," in Borroff, Critical Essays, p. 158.

have "knowledge and individuality--and a measure of freedom."[47] They progress much in the same way. It is commonly accepted that James's The Portrait of a Lady does not have the polish that his novel The Wings of the Dove reveals, and the same is true of Stevens' poetry. In a beginning poem like "The Plot Against the Giant," Stevens writes about "Heavenly labials in a world of gutturals." Later, in "The World as Meditation," with the same earthy theme, the presentation is somewhat more abstract: "Someone is moving / On the horizon and lifting himself up above it."

Some of the symbols Stevens uses help to show that his physical world does not become impoverished in any of his books. "Without the world of the concrete, the real, or . . . , the world of measurable phenomena, we would have no ideas,"[48] Baird observes. "Object proceeds to idea," he continues, and therefore objects often serve as symbols of them. "We experience through metaphor,"[49] O'Connor says of "Poems of Our Climate," and the poet's are taken from his own world.

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[47]Pearce, in Samuel French Morse, Wallace Stevens: Poetry as Life (New York: Pegasus, 1970), pp. 21, 204.

[48]Baird, The Dome, p. 14.

[49]O'Connor, The Shaping Spirit, p. 118.

Chief among symbols in literature is often the sun. In Stevens' poetry, Doggett sees the great fireball as "a savage source," as the "fulfillment of the subject-object relationship."[50] Stern says that the poem "Sunday Morning" is a day of the sun, when the heroine of the poem can find ". . . comforts of the sun, / In pungent fruit and bright, green wings. . . ." Perhaps the oldest religious god, worshipped for centuries, the sun is to Stevens the origin of all things material: "It is a wheel, the rays / Around the sun. The wheel survives the myths." Stevens writes that "The sun is the country wherever he is," and "The moon is a part of supremacy always," the latter being a symbol of Stevens' imagination.[51]

Resembling the natural world, the one created by Stevens is filled with color. Basic are the colors blue and green, which stand for the poet's imagination and the reality of earth, according to Eugene Nassar. "Thinking of your blue-shadowed silk, / Is music," Stevens says in "Peter Quince at the Clavier." "The Green Plant," on the other hand, "Glares, outside of the legend, with the barbarous green / Of the harsh reality of which it is a part." Stevens includes several colors in this poem, says Nassar, as in the following excerpt:

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[50]Doggett, Stevens' Poetry, pp. 31, 171.

[51]Heringman, "The Use of Poetry," in Pearce and Miller, The Act, p. 1.

The brown at the bottom of red
The orange far down in yellow,
Are falsifications from a sun
In a mirror, without heat,
In a constant secondariness.

Red in this poem is "reality unfalsified," Nassar says, and in another Stevens poem it is illustrated in the following lines: "There were those that returned to hear him read from the poem of life / . . . they were those that would have wept to step barefoot into reality." Stevens' use of gold connotes "precious," while purple means "delight," says Nassar. "Bronze is a sun-color and a cold permanent metal," he says. Nassar also points out, in his discussion of Stevens' color symbolism, that critics early explored the poet's color imagery, and analysis of it any more detailed, he feels, only would supplement what is already commonly accepted in Stevens' world of blues and greens. It is important to note, however, that color represents feeling for Stevens, depending upon the shades depicted to illustrate a mood. Geared to emotion, the use of colors in Stevens' poetry obviously reinforces the strong sensory base of his poetics.[52]

The elements of the earth enrich the sensuous order as treated in the poetry of Stevens. According to Ralph J. Mills, Jr., in an article on Stevens' rock imagery, some

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[52]Stevens, "Peter Quince at the Clavier," "The Green Plant," "The Large Man Reading," Collected Poems, pp. 90, 506, 38, as quoted in Nassar, An Anatomy, pp. 25-38.

earthy objects are "moon, sun, stars, sea, stones, rivers, trees, and vegetation, wind and rain, the cycle of the seasons--all . . . heavily weighted symbols." He illustrates their importance as exemplified in "Esthetique du Mal":

> And out of what one sees and hears and out
> Of what one feels, who could have thought to make
> So many selves, so many sensuous worlds,
> As if the air, the mid-day air, was swarming
> With the metaphysical changes that occur,
> Merely in living as and where we live.[53]

According to James Baird, "wind and weather are the movements of human existence upon the rock and within the being of the poet who flourishes there." He discusses two elements which Mills does not include--frost and cloud--which are symbolic of human mortality, he says. He illustrates with "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery": "Under the mat of frost and over the mat of clouds / But in between lies the sphere of my fortune." To Baird, the moon is a symbol of inherent life: "In spite of the mere objectiveness of things, / Like a cloud-cap in the corner of a looking-glass, / A change of color in the plain poet's mind."[54]

According to Nassar, the wind is a symbolic sensory force, as in the lines "A tempest cracked on the theatre.

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[53]Stevens, "Esthetique," Collected Poems, p. 312, as quoted in Mills, Accent, p. 81.

[54]Stevens, "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery," and "Note on Moonlight," Collected Poems, pp. 151, 531-532, as quoted in Baird, The Dome, pp. 143-145.

Quickly, / The wind beat in the roof and half the walls."

In "The Paltry Nude," the wind

> . . . speeds her
> Blowing upon her hands
> And watery back.
> She touches the clouds, where she goes
> In the circle of her traverse of the sea.[55]

James Baird points out that light is related to "physical process." It is "a constant of reality." He illustrates with the poem "Tattoo," which describes metaphysically the relationship of light to the imagination:

> The light is like a spider.
> It crawls over the water.
> It crawls over the edges of the snow.
> It crawls under your eyelids
> And spreads its web there--
> Its two webs.[56]

"All sounds--the sound of things, the cry of life . . . , give . . . meaning to the world," says Frank Doggett. The most important sound in Stevens' poetry is music, he says. For instance, it is illustrated in the popular poem, "Peter Quince at the Clavier." Doggett says: "Music, in Stevens' figurative use of it, may also stand for a personal experience of the world."[57] The entire section of

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[55]Stevens, "Repetitions of a Young Captain," "The Paltry Nude Starts on a Spring Voyage," Collected Poems, pp. 5, 306, as quoted in Nassar, An Anatomy, p. 114.

[56]Stevens, "Tattoo," Collected Poems, p. 81, as quoted in Baird, The Dome, p. 121.

[57]Doggett, Stevens' Poetry, pp. 165, 186.

Harmonium, evidenced by its title, represents a musical world, says J. Hillis Miller.[58] Nassar says that sound in Stevens' poetry is "the fundamental tone of the universe." Depending upon the poet's mood, sound varies in Stevens' poetry. In The Necessary Angel, Stevens says: "He seeks an image certain as meaning is / To sound, sound's substance and execution, / The particular tingle in a proclamation."[59]

Richard A. Macksey notes that the seasons are important when he says: "In the weather of Stevens' sensibility . . . the consciousness describes a cycle analogous to the seasons."[60] Miller believes that the season of autumn is a time in Stevens' poetry when one is exposed to "an 'uncreated' world, with everything still to be imagined."[61] In the poem "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," autumn is ". . . a halt / for farewells, a sad hanging on for remembrances."[62] Movement from season to season in his poems represents for Stevens a constant

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[58]Miller, "Wallace Stevens: Poetry of Being," in Pearce and Miller, The Act, p. 148.

[59]Stevens, The Necessary Angel, p. 84, as quoted in Nassar, An Anatomy, p. 54.

[60]Macksey, "The Climates," in Pearce and Miller, The Act, p. 187.

[61]Miller, "Poetry of Being," Pearce and Miller, The Act, p. 149.

[62]Stevens, "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," Collected Poems, p. 487, as quoted in Pearce and Miller, The Act, p. 149.

oscillation, a movement of time that prevents his poetry from attaining a fixity. Things go from summer to autumn. Life is not fixed, so neither should be his poetry.[63]

According to Nassar, "Winter, like night, serves as the tragic background upon which light and life play . . . when the mind destroys imaginative worlds created in summer."[64] In "The Plain Sense of Things," Stevens says: "The absence of the imagination had itself to be imagined." The transitory nature of the seasons illustrates the falling and vanishing existence of things,[65] adds Doggett.

One reads of Stevens' landscapes. To him, man is "The intelligence of his soil, / the sovereign ghost." John Finch discusses Stevens' north and south in his poetry, and says that especially in Harmonium the poet uses geographic symbolism. Poems such as "O Florida, Venereal Soil," "Fabliau of Florida," "Two Figures in a Dense Violet Night," all have "tropical warmth, deep colors, vegetative and sensuous existence."[66] The south is youth, says

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[63]Miller, "Poetry of Being," Pearce and Miller, The Act, pp. 150-151.

[64]Nassar, An Anatomy, p. 41.

[65]Doggett, Stevens' Poetry, pp. 174-175.

[66]John Finch, "North and South in Stevens' America," as quoted in O'Connor, The Shaping Spirit, p. 85.

Baird,[67] and according to Stern, Stevens travels from south to north in his poetry. He moves from the "Droning of the surf" in Florida to "A view of New Haven, say, through the certain eye, / The eye made clear of uncertainty, with the sight, / Of simple seeing, without reflection." Other "geographical reference" is slight, says Nassar, with most of it centering around Oklahoma, Key West, Cuba, Tennessee, and Connecticut, where his business trips were held.[68] But the sense of the land is strong.

Animals figure into Stevens' appreciation of physical reality, such as lions, elephants, bears, and worms. Flowers used are lilacs and irises, according to Nassar. He fails to mention bird symbolism in detail, though Stevens' poetry is filled with it. In "Le Monocle de mon Oncle," there is a red bird that flies "across the golden floor." Baird calls it "youthful imagination." Cockatoos in their "green freedom," blackbirds, and those with "coppery-keen claws" live in Stevens' poetry, says Baird.[69] Nassar sees the cock as a reality figure, an ordering creature because of its "natural dazzle": "He munches a dry shell while he exerts / His will, yet never ceases, perfect cock / To flare, in a sun-pallor of his rock."[70]

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[67]Baird, The Dome, p. 5.

[68]Nassar, An Anatomy, p. 41.

[69]Baird, The Dome, pp. 155, 165.

[70]Stevens, "The Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws," Collected Poems, p. 82, as quoted in Nassar, An Anatomy, p. 47.

The most significant bird, however, in Stevens' poetry is the peacock. Its importance comes partly from its ancient heritage as a symbol of faith in Hinduism, in Greek mythology, and in Christianity. According to Baird, the bird, with its physical radiance, was a symbol of faith, and for Stevens, Baird says, the bird stands for a faith opposed to the traditional: it is the poet's imagination. In "Domination of Black," the peacock's cry stands for absolute certainty of imagination," and of man's earthly experience, he says.[71] According to Doggett, the peacock cries against death in this poem and symbolizes "mind or self." He says the peacock imagery connects the whole poem with reality by noting that Stevens compares the leaves in the poem to the bird's tail: "The colors of their tails / Were like the leaves themselves / Turning in the wind. . . ."[72] By its beauty, balance, and stately motion, the bird symbolizes an important ordering principle of animal life.[73]

Ralph Mills' article on Stevens' rock imagery (mentioned earlier) lends some fresh conceptions to the physical center of his poetic program. Much of Stevens' rock imagery is a graphic illustration of his theology,

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[71]Baird, The Dome, pp. 108-109, 165.

[72]Stevens, "Domination of Black," Collected Poems, p. 9, as quoted in Doggett, Stevens' Poetry, p. 18.

[73]Nassar, An Anatomy, p. 88.

which is the topic of the next chapter. When discussing the symbol of the rock, mention of his religious feeling is unavoidable. Unlike the Christian Church, Stevens' church is built upon the rock of summer, says Mills. The rock contains "within itself the natural (green) world grasped through the senses in an intuition of sheer physical being," he says, adding that it represents "the possibilities of the created world." In other words, the permanence of reality is perhaps best symbolized by Stevens' use of the tangible rock, which is the title of the last book of poetry he included in the Collected Poems. It represents a closing of the seasons as they transpire in his works. From the earth, the rock stands long after things that one touches are gone. That Stevens loved the symbol of the rock is shown in his poem "The Men that are Falling": "This death was his belief, though death is a stone. / This man loved earth, not heaven, enough to die."[74]

Lapping the body of the land like a cat with a curled tongue is the sea of Stevens' world. About its poetic significance, Frank Lentricchia says: "The sea is not a symbol of spiritual reality, just a 'body wholly body.'"[75] If anything, the sea represents the world of chaos, says

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[74]Stevens, "The Men that are Falling," Collected Poems, p. 188, as quoted in Mills, Accent, pp. 77-79.

[75]Lentricchia, The Gaiety of Language, p. 182.

Nassar. He says that everything that needs to be said concerning this symbol can be illustrated in "The Idea of Order at Key West." He says that "There is a 'dumbfounding abyss' between the 'ocean' and our subjective desires that only poetry, 'good speech,' 'good air' can attempt to bridge."[76]

Moving from a discussion of several particular symbols in Stevens' poetry, and the major ones, it is important to consider a few main points of some of Stevens' longer poems to illustrate further his stress of the sensuous order. Donald Davie says that the poem "Le Monocle de mon Oncle" reaffirms life for the individual who finds the world "less insistent and intoxicating." He says that in Stevens' poem, the poet says: "This is not the case, because the imagination does not decay with the senses, but can create a world as 'real' as the actual world." Stevens' poem illustrates this idea.[77]

Our bloom is gone. We are the fruit thereof.

Life, however, is not gone, because:

> I quiz all sounds, all thoughts, all everything
> For the music and manner of the paladins
> To make oblation fit. Where shall I find
> Bravura adequate to this great hymn?

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[76]Nassar, An Anatomy, pp. 115-116.

[77]Donald Davie, "Essential Gaudiness: The Poems of Wallace Stevens," Twentieth Century, CLIII (June, 1953), 456.

Lentricchia believes that it is in this poem that Stevens redeems humanity by creating "order from within the self":

> Is it for nothing, then that old Chinese
> Sat tittivating by their mountain pools
> Or in the Yangtse studied out their beards?
> I shall not play the flat historic scale.
> You know how Utamaro's beauties sought
> The end of love in their all-speaking braids. . . .
> Alas! Have not all the barbers lived in vain
> That not one curl in nature has survived?[78]

According to Lentricchia, all poets "have lived in vain because the myths ("curls") with which they ordered reality derived no vitality from history, but originated wholly in the dying, finite self."[79] There is, Stevens realized, a new world for the aging in the imagination, and it can be as sensuous as one wants to make it.

The sensuous order is quite explicit in "The Comedian as the Letter C." Sukenick gives a solid explication of the poem in his book. According to this critic, the main theme of the poem, if it can be stated so concisely, involves Crispin's aim to relate the poet to reality, or even better, to gain a "rapport" with life.[80] Hi Simons believes that the poem further illustrates "an exotic realism, in which he [Crispin] sought reality in radical sensuousness." Simons sees the whole poem as a struggle

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[78]Stevens, "Le Monocle," Collected Poems, p. 14, as quoted in Lentricchia, "The Ironic Eye," p. 344.

[79]Ibid.

[80]Sukenick, Musing the Obscure, p. 47.

"between objectivity and subjectivity, between realism and protean romanticism." Along with Sukenick, Simons believes Crispin's journey is an attempt to find an honest American poetry. In finding it, he finds at its base, the world of the feelings: "A river bore / The vessel inward . . . He savored rankness like a sensualist. It made him see how much / Of what he saw he never saw at all in the smelly everyday things about him."[81]

About this particular poem, Howard Baker says: "Reality may best be grasped by tabulating sensory experience,"[82] as Crispin does. Daniel Fuchs says the poem "shows a plain man . . . lost in the conflicting claims of sensibility, who resolves his problem by giving them all up for a nice shady home and daughters with curls."[83] Of the curls mentioned in Stevens' poems, Nassar contends that they are another reality symbol.[84]

In the fourth section of "The Comedian," Stevens says: "Nota; his soil is man's intelligence, / That's

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[81]Stevens, "The Comedian," Collected Poems, p. 36, as quoted in Hi Simons, "The Comedian as the Letter C: Its Sense and Significance," The Southern Review, V (Winter, 1940), 460, 454, 461.

[82]Howard Baker, "Wallace Stevens and Other Poets," Southern Review, I (Autumn, 1935), 370.

[83]Fuchs, The Comic Spirit, p. 33.

[84]Nassar, An Anatomy, p. 63.

better. That's worth crossing seas to find out."[85] Crispin has found his rapport with reality. The poem ends with Stevens saying: "So may the relation of each man be clipped." According to Fuchs, Stevens means: "Modern self must settle for no grand conclusions."[86]

In the opening lines of this chapter, it was stated that "Esthetique du Mal" is a poem about the agonies of humanity. William Van O'Connor believes the poem to be explicitly about pain, which is a very human characteristic.[87] Pain and suffering are present in plenty in the physical world, and therefore they represent another principle in Stevens' use of the sensuous order. They serve as the poetic reminder, observes Fuchs, that "Evil, and pain . . . give rise to beauty."[88] In a Partisan Review article, Wylie Sypher compares this poem to Eliot's The Waste Land. Eliot's theme of creating a purpose in life from the wasteland of his period also exhibits itself in Stevens' poem as an attempt to find fulfillment through the sensuous order, says Sypher, because Stevens sees a need of fictions by which to live "as and where

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[85]Stevens, "The Comedian," Collected Poems, p. 36, as quoted in Fuchs, The Comic Spirit, p. 48.

[86]Fuchs, The Comic Spirit, p. 61.

[87]O'Connor, The Shaping Spirit, p. 73.

[88]Fuchs, The Comic Spirit, p. 169.

we live."[89] The lesson to be learned from the poem is best summed up by Roy Harvey Pearce: it is the "acceptance of reality."[90] Imagination plays a subdued role in the poem. As Nassar says, X in the poem represents what one makes of the world minus imagination,[91] and Frank Doggett agrees that in this poem, "the physical contains all."[92] Stevens' major poetry often celebrates the physical world. As Doggett says, "there is no other."[93]

As a conclusion to the study of Stevens' varied emphases upon the sensuous order, there are several important poems not yet treated. The much anthologized "Emperor of Ice Cream" is such a poem. Its festive title is a misleading introduction to a poem which neatly describes a scene where death has recently occurred. To celebrate such a thing would be surprising. Most poets deal with mortality in a somber manner with implied consolations and assurances of a better life in the hereafter. But not Stevens. Life is like a delicious, melting ice cream cone that is gone too soon to fret about. The point to be

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[89]Wylie Sypher, "Connoisseur in Chaos: Wallace Stevens," Partisan Review, XIII (Winter, 1946), 86.

[90]Pearce, "The Life," in Borroff, Critical Essays, p. 126.

[91]Nassar, An Anatomy, p. 44.

[92]Doggett, Stevens' Poetry, p. 7.

[93]Ibid., p. 109.

learned is that life was good while it was being eaten. He lets "be be finale of seem," which fits his theory of poetry. The ice cream poet teaches also that his entire collection of works should represent what Baird has described as a "gaudium of being,"[94] and that the self is important in understanding the world of the physical because, as Baird says: "Vision in Stevens is strictly contained within the I."[95]

Baird believes that such an outlook on Stevens' part reflects the average American's way of life.[96] Perhaps he is correct. At least, several critics have thoughts about Stevens' ordinary people, who figure into some of his poetry. Some appear to have a wasteland attitude, exemplified by "The Ordinary Women":

> . . . from their poverty they rose,
> . . . They flung monotony behind,
> Turned from their want, and nonchalant,
> They crowded
> The nocturnal halls.

Erotic stress is seen in the poem "A Dish of Peaches in Russia," with natural reality illustrated "with much gusto":[97]

> With my whole body I taste these peaches,
> I touch them and smell them. Who speaks?

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[94]Baird, The Dome, p. xxi.

[95]Ibid., p. xvii.

[96]Ibid., p. 248.

[97]Fuchs, The Comic Spirit, p. 135.

I absorb them as the Angevine
Absorbs Anjou. I see them as a lover sees,

As a young lover sees the first buds of spring
And as the black Spaniard plays his guitar.

. . . . . .

. . . the peaches are large and round,

Ah! and red; and they have peach fuzz, ah!
They are full of juice and the skin is soft.

Poems like "Evening Without Angels" and "To An Old Philosopher in Rome" are examples of Stevens' poetic theory of the "fulfillment of human existence,"[98] says Louis J. Martz, in an article on Stevens' world as meditation. In "Evening Without Angels," Stevens asks rhetorically:

Was the sun concoct for angels or for men?
Sad men made angels of the sun, and of
The moon they made their own attendants,
Which led them back to angels, after death.

To his wife, Stevens wrote: "Do not look for it [life] either, except in yourself; in the secret places of your spirit and in all your hidden senses."[99] It has been shown that Stevens represents no particular philosophic school, but only what he felt was to become his philosophy as he ordered it into poetry. His celebration of the sensuous order is Stevens' original philosophy as it influences his views on anything in his life, such as his religious outlook. His ingenious use of the physical world

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[98]Louis J. Martz, "The World as Meditation," The Yale Review, XLVII (Summer, 1958), 519.

[99]Stevens, letter to his wife, 1905-1906 in The Letters, p. 85.

to achieve his poetic aims makes it possible to agree with Fuchs when he says: "The image of Stevens as a poet who does not seriously represent a point of view, who succeeds only in representing a tableau of exquisite sensations, is no longer put forth."[100] His valuation of the sensuous order in his creation of a fictive world makes him "the maker of the song [he] sang," and becomes almost a religion to him.

There is of course much more to be said concerning Stevens' emphasis of the sensuous order. The important point to keep in mind, however, is that the sensuous order is Stevens' framework for any poetic themes he uses. As Morton Zabel says: "The sensory world is man's way of ordering his life, of finding the law of intelligence by which he may be released from his damnation."[101] And Stevens adds:

> If from the earth we came, it was an earth
> That bore us as a part of all the things
> It breeds and that was lewder than it is. Our
> nature is her nature. . . .[102]

For Wallace Stevens, poetry is life, and vice versa, as Samuel French Morse has indicated in the title of his latest book on the poet. Everything, including his

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[100]Fuchs, The Comic Spirit, p. 94.

[101]Zabel, "The Image of Man," in Borroff, Critical Essays, p. 155.

[102]Stevens, "Anatomy of Monotony," Collected Poems, p. 107, as quoted in Doggett, Stevens' Poetry, p. 32.

thinking, finds its security in the things of this world. William Burney observes that for Stevens, "The fertile fact or sensation is primary; everything, including the existence of god, follows from that."[103]

All of these rich and varied references to the world of physical reality, both by critics and by Stevens himself, serve to open out the highly complex ways in which the sensory base of reality must be seen as the master principle behind the discussion of any more specialized themes in Stevens, such as those of faith and love, which will be treated in the remainder of this study.

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[103]Burney, Wallace Stevens, p. 177.

CHAPTER II

GOD, IMAGINATION, AND "THE GREAT POEM OF THE EARTH"

Friedrich Nietzsche's madman was the first to pose and then answer his own question: "Is God dead?" Running through the streets of his village, he shouted: "We have killed him--you and I."[1] Then he left his people disillusioned because they had not understood him. "I come too early . . . my time has not come yet,"[2] he said.

However, he is echoed in the present century by philosophers, theologians and various other men of letters. The twentieth century rejuvenation of Nietzsche's idea has been discussed more during the last decade by contemporary religious thinkers than it was when Nietzsche coined the phrase. The return to the idea represents, instead of an impulse toward atheism, a trend in religious thought which focuses upon a widespread belief in the importance of man and of his own conscience. During the 1960's, the "God is dead" issue centered upon the idea that with the greater independence gained by developing

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[1]Friedrich Nietzsche, "Atheism and Its Results," The Gay Science, in The Portable Nietzsche, ed. Walter Kaufman (New York, The Viking Press, 1954), pp. 95-96.

[2]Ibid.

his intelligence, man's traditional religious rituals have assumed a diminished importance. Such thinking has been associated with men of letters whose intellects, often superior to the ordinary man's, diminish their need for organized worship. It is no new idea with poets that organized religion makes it easier for the unimaginative man to follow some conventional system. Percy Bysshe Shelley, for example, says: "The delusions of Christianity are fatal to genius and originality; they limit thought."[3]

Another poet who believes like Shelley is Wallace Stevens. Religion for him depends upon the use of imagination and finds expression through the medium of poetry. He conceives his poetry, not as a replacement for God, but as a poetry about things which are more ancient than beliefs themselves, says William Burney.[4] If poetry were a substitute, it would be based on certain beliefs, which it never pretends to be. Stevens, like Shelley, never limits himself to a single school of religious theory. His famous poem "Sunday Morning" is over-quoted by critics when they deal with Stevens' religious thought, but it is used because perhaps more than any other poem it encompasses his entire religious "theory."

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[3]Percy Bysshe Shelley in Ariel: The Life of Shelley, by André Maurois, translated by Ella D'Arcy (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1924), p. 296.

[4]Burney, Wallace Stevens, p. 73.

Robert Pack says the poem--an attempt to show how one should accept the world joyfully--has an "appeal of sensuous perception and feeling" in the opening lines: "Complacencies of the peignoir, and late / Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair." The woman in the first part of the poem enjoys the secular morning of the sun's day, which is usually devoted to Christian stress on the "Dominion of blood and sepulchre." In part II, which Pack says is about the natural world, Stevens tells the woman that "Divinity must live within herself" if she is to be happy in the world, since its natural aspects are "the measures destined for her soul." Pack says the poem's essential meaning lies in the "idea of this world as paradise,"[5] which Stevens puts as follows:

> And shall the earth
> Seem all of paradise that we shall know?
> The sky will be much friendlier then than now,
> A part of labor and a part of pain,
> And next in glory to enduring love,
> Not this dividing and indifferent blue.

Heaven is earth for Stevens because it is all we need to know to be happy, and all we really can know. "Sunday Morning" is one of Stevens' first poems in celebration of the earth's goodness. It stresses a new mode of humanistic, secular worship as the poet compares the singing lake and trees to angels. This is the kind of

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[5]Pack, Wallace Stevens, pp. 40, 24, 33.

"heavenly fellowship" man will have, the kind that sees men die to earth as a necessary act of life.

That this poem rejects traditional religion all critics agree. However, as Herbert J. Stern shrewdly says, the poem "is unmarked by either hostility or cynicism toward religion."[6] It celebrates the world and is not anti-religious, as Stevens says himself:

> This is not essentially a woman's meditation on religion and the meaning of life. It is anybody's meditation. . . . The poem is simply an expression of paganism, although, of course, I did not think I was expressing paganism when I wrote it.[7]

At best, the poem is eclectic, says Henry Wells.[8]

Stevens, so much like Henry James, relies upon personal imaginative powers to make life meaningful. As Samuel French Morse says: "Stevens is a poet who argues that life is what one makes of it within the limitations of one's own sensibility."[9] He is illustrating by the woman's Sunday morning at home that her appreciations of "coffee and oranges in a sunny chair" are just as significant as those of church-goers, and are more primary.

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[6]Stern, Art of Uncertainty, p. 95.

[7]Stevens, letter to L. W. Payne, Jr., March 31, 1928, in The Letters, p. 250.

[8]Henry W. Wells, Introduction to Wallace Stevens (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964), p. 154.

[9]Samuel French Morse, "Introduction," to Poems by Wallace Stevens, selected by Morse (New York: Random House, 1947), p. xiii.

Because he seems to reject belief in God as most people view such belief, Stevens is--like Nietzsche's madman--often misunderstood. By the general public he is ignored and by many critics he is labeled everything from an agnostic to a hedonist, all of which will be discussed later. He has been called an atheist, but the claim needs qualifying. As his philosophy of poetry encompasses "life," Samuel French Morse says by the title of his critical biography of Stevens, so his religious attitudes encompass no other doctrine except "life." As Daniel Fuchs notes, Stevens goes back to the roots of man's existence to establish a faith in life.[10]

In the expression of some recent theology, "God is dead, and with him died the heaven of consecrated symbols coming down through the Christian or Platonic ages," says James Baird.[11] Essentially, when Stevens is discussed in relation to religion, two things must be kept in mind: he abhors adhering to any specific dogma, and the earth is the center of his worship, though earth is not God. Stevens offers a possible definition of God in "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour": "God and the imagination are one." He says in "The Irrational Element in Poetry" that ". . . while it can lie in the temperament

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[10]Fuchs, The Comic Spirit, p. 70.

[11]Baird, "Introduction" to The Dome, p. xii.

of very few of us to write poetry to find God, it is probably the purpose of each of us to write poetry to find the good which, in the Platonic sense, is synonymous with God."[12] This is one of the most revelatory passages Stevens has written, and deserves wider attention among his critics.

In "Imagination as Value" Stevens explains his mission as such a poet: "The great poems of heaven and hell have been written and the great poem of the earth remains to be written."[13] His function is encompassed in a statement about his poetry by Fuchs: "If there is a God, he has become increasingly difficult to know. Stevens' reverence for what we do know contains more piety than the dogmas of the contradictory creeds which claim to know the answers. He wants nothing less holy than the oneness of man and his world."[14]

Stevens writes great spiritual poems of two kinds: those which are of the earth, and those which deal more with his imagination as a divine force. Both types will be discussed separately. But first, a consideration of what other critics have said about Stevens' religious

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[12]Stevens, "The Irrational Element in Poetry," in Opus Posthumous, ed. by Samuel French Morse (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1966), p. 222.

[13]Stevens, "Imagination as Value," in The Necessary Angel, p. 142.

[14]Fuchs, The Comic Spirit, p. 92.

thought will shed important light upon his unique spiritual stance.

Frank Doggett says "The Auroras of Autumn" is a good example of Stevens' agnostic tendencies when he notes these lines from the poem:

> So then, these lights are not a spell of light,
> A saying out of a cloud, but innocence.
> An innocence of the earth and no false sign
> Or symbol of malice. That we partake thereof,
> Lie down like children in this holiness,
> As if, awake, we lay in the quiet of sleep.

Doggett says Stevens' agnostic tendencies toward metaphysical innocence reflected in this passage are "severe." However, the "innocence of the earth and no false sign" in which we "lie down like children in this holiness" still is a reverent appraisal of the created world. Doggett says Stevens does not denounce the supreme creator, he merely ignores him. He also believes Stevens' poetry resembles the naturalistic school of literature. Basing his assumptions of Stevens' naturalism on "an inherent skepticism that rejects the transcendent and can never rest in any explanation or circumscription of the world," Doggett claims Stevens' mind "is only nature looking at itself."[15] Doggett pushes a bit too far, since a great shyness about God might not be the same as ignoring Him.

Stevens' "hedonism" has occupied a number of his critics. In her article on "Metamorphosis in Wallace

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[15]Doggett, Stevens' Poetry, pp. 15, 16, 38.

Stevens," Sister M. Bernetta Quinn says the poet is branded as a hedonist too often because of his consistent use of analogies. "Metamorphosis" is her term for Stevens' use of metaphor. Sister Bernetta feels that in being called a hedonist Stevens is not being treated fairly because he is more than "a strummer of nuances on a guitar, an exponent of preciosity, or a dandy."[16] A poem such as "Esthetique du Mal" illustrates this, for what sort of hedonist's pleasure is derived from a statement like "Life is a bitter aspic"? We are, according to Stevens, "Natives of poverty, children of malheur," and we are redeemed by poetry, not by hedonism; Stevens asserts that "The gaiety of language is our seigneur."

According to Stern, Yvor Winters' essay "Wallace Stevens, or the Hedonist's Progress" is the best discussion of the poet's hedonistic tendencies. Stern says Winters defines Stevens' hedonism thus: "Pleasure, which is the aim of life, consists in intensity of experience. . . . For the hedonist 'aesthete,' literature . . . can provide a finer technique of such cultivation than can any other mode of activity."[17] Stern says that Winters believes Stevens' hedonism is his ruin, although at the time Winters wrote

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[16]Sister Bernetta Quinn, O.S.F., "Metamorphosis in Wallace Stevens," The Sewanee Review, LX (Spring, 1952), 240.

[17]Ivor Winters, "Wallace Stevens or the Hedonist's Progress," in The Art of Uncertainty by Stern, p. 17.

his essay only two of Stevens' greatest poems, "Sunday Morning" and "Peter Quince at the Clavier," had been written. In a letter to Theodore Weiss, Stevens comments on Winters' essay:

> I have read a review of his [Winters'] book and gather that he considers my poems to be expressions of Paterian hedonism. Poems written over a long period of time express a good many things. Certainly the things that I have written recently are intended to express an agreement with reality. I need not say that what is back of a desire for agreement with reality is a different thing.[18]

Stevens neither says he is or he is not a hedonist, which is a good reason to believe he does not intend to limit himself again to any particular philosophy of spirit, although Stern lists several critics who agree with Winters, such as Gorham B. Munson, Llewellyn Powys, and J. V. Cunningham, who believe Stevens' poetry to be "a philosophically irresponsible hedonism and a socially irresponsible escapism."[19]

Fuchs asserts that "Too much has been made of his hedonism,"[20] believing that though Stevens' poetry is secular, he is deeply reflective, and that his belief is better defined within the realm of heterodoxy, to suitably accompany his modernity. However, it is Frank Lentricchia who comes closest to defining Stevens'

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[19]Stern, Art of Uncertainty, p. 27.

[20]Fuchs, The Comic Spirit, p. 63.

religious attitude as the poet probably would wish. Lentricchia says "spirit" is not soul, but is imagination, and his poems (which Lentricchia calls hymns) are not poetry of the soul praising God, but are constructions of the imagination in honor of a new concept of soul.[21] This is an incisive way of looking at the religiosity of Stevens.

There are very few critics who have dealt with Stevens' religious poetry, but these are enough to get an idea of the possibilities. As creator of his own poetic world, Stevens in a way becomes his own god, although he venerates transcendent force and radiance in the world he has to work with. In his journals and letters there is little to support any arguments in favor of a particular religion Stevens preferred. However, they present an excellent case for this chapter in proving that the very absence of any orthodox thinking, as evidenced by some excerpts, makes an even stronger case for the poet whose religion is in life itself.

The first real mention of the subject of religion is perhaps a journal entry by Stevens in 1902. He had graduated from Harvard and at the time was struggling as a journalist in New York. A visit to St. Patrick's Cathedral prompted him to write:

> An old argument with me is that the true religious force in the world is not the church but the world

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[21]Lentricchia, "The Ironic Eye," p. 347.

> itself: the mysterious callings of Nature and our responses. . . . The priest in me worshipped one God at one shrine; the poet another God at another shrine. The priest worshipped mercy and love; the poet, beauty and might. In the shadows of the church I could hear the prayers of men and women; in the shadows of the trees nothing human mingled with Divinity.[22]

Hardly an atheist, agnostic or naturalist would write such thoughts, and this early passage seems most pregnant with later points of emphasis.

Five years later, the following excerpt from a letter to his future wife Elsie Moll shows a development in his religious thought:

> I am not in the least religious. The sun clears my spirit . . . and an occasional sight of the sea and the odor of the earth, and many things. Such things make a god of a man; but a chapel makes a man of him. Churches are human.[23]

Stevens is obviously interested in a higher kind of divinity than the church allows. The church is a significant symbol of spiritual journey as Stevens uses it in his early writings. He is beginning to put man in a church of the earth. It is evident that Stevens is concerned about religion, though he claims he is not a religious person. It is even clearer, however, that orthodoxy is not for him, as he plainly says a little over a month later:

> Last night was house-cleaning night with me. I went through my things . . . and threw away

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[22]Stevens, from his Journal, Sunday, Aug. 10, 1902, in The Letters, pp. 58-59.

[23]Stevens, letter to Elsie Moll, Sunday, March 10, 1907, in The Letters, p. 96.

> a pile of useless stuff. How hard it is to do it! One of the things was my Bible. I hate the look of a Bible . . . I'm glad the silly thing is gone.[24]

He does not necessarily reject God, only those things which represent to him an obsolete position.

In 1909 he recounted in a long passage to Elsie another experience which also took place in church. In a small treatise on the church as the most outstanding relic of Christianity, a symbol of irrelevance, Stevens wrote that if churches would really represent the life of Christ, they should exhibit poverty also, not grandiose architecture and expensive decorations. His visit was to St. John's Chapel where only a gold cross decorated the altar. He says:

> I do not wonder that the church is so largely a relic. Its vitality depended on its association with Palestine, so to speak. . . . People doubt the existence of Jesus--at least they doubt incidents of his life. . . . But I do not understand that they deny God. I think everyone admits that in some form or another.--The thought makes the world sweeter--even if God be no more than a mystery of life.[25]

This passage is merely another illustration of his disapproval of limiting religion to a church with outmoded relics. In "A Fading of the Sun" he sums up what the "church" really is: "If joy shall be without a book," Stevens asks, then it must be found in life itself

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[24]Stevens, letter to Elsie Moll, Friday, April 19, 1907, p. 102.

[25]Ibid., p. 140.

and the people who comprise it. He uses beautiful imagery to compare people as "pillars of the sun, / Supports of night." The things they eat, "tea, wine, bread, meat," are better sustenance than is the symbolic bread and wine in the churches of tradition. This poem echoes nineteenth-century poet Emily Dickinson, whose views on religion the contemporary poet may have mirrored:

> I have no life but this,
> To lead it here;
> Nor any death, but lest
> Dispelled from there;
> Nor tie to earths to come,
> Nor action new,
> Except through this extent,
> The realm of you.[26]

In "St. Amorer's Church from the Outside" Stevens observes:

> St. Amorer's was once an immense success.
> It rose loftily and stood massively; and to lie
> In its church-yard, in the province of St. Amorer's,
> Fixed one for good in geranium-colored day.

St. Amorer's church, no longer relevant, like most others stands for days gone by as the poet says that it has a stuffy smell like old buildings acquire after years of seeing people come and go. It also has the expected amount of leaks and holes. The church of today, Stevens claims, is found in living and in one's present surroundings--"Its chapel" is "His own." Whatever one does with his life is how he worships at his church.

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[26]Emily Dickinson, "Poem No. 140," in Emily Dickinson, ed. Richard Wilbur, selected with an introduction by John Malcolm Brinnin (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1960), p. 130.

"St. Amorer's" cannot reflect modern religious thinking. Once the church was built, the poet says, it ceased to grow. "This dizzle-dazzle of being new / And of becoming" is what man can do if he is not shackled by the old church, Stevens says.

The Bible is another relic of yesterday which is improperly exalted as Stevens says in his Journal. Judging from the excerpt, Stevens' mother used to read the Bible to her children each evening at bedtime, and here is Stevens' opinion of the importance of such a ritual:

> I remember how she always read a chapter from the Bible every night to all of us when we were ready for bed. . . . She always maintained an active interest in the Bible, and found there the solace she desired--she was, of course, disappointed as we all are.[27]

Perhaps more could be said of Stevens' ideas, scattered as they are, on religion. So far several of the most important critics' ideas have been presented along with the few remarks the poet made himself on the subject. His poems, however, speak for themselves, and, divided into two groups, illustrate what he means by "the great poem of the earth" and "God and the imagination are one." Stevens makes this claim in honor of "the great poem" in "Anatomy of Monotony":

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[27]Stevens, from his Journal, June 25, 1912, in The Letters, p. 173.

> If from the earth we came, it was an earth
> That bore us as a part of all the things
> It breeds and that was lewder than it is.
> Our nature is her nature.

Stevens celebrates the temporal earth as paradise, as illustrated in "Sunday Morning." In Part II of "Anatomy of Monotony" he offers a Whitmanesque assertion that earth-worship is all one needs to perform: "The body walks forth naked in the sun / And, out of tenderness or grief, the sun / Gives comfort." In this poem Stevens points very clearly to man's human dignity and at the same time his nearness to the earth from which he came. "Naked in the sun" he should live, worshipping the source of the earth's strength as the most heavenly object of worship. In the last four lines, one is sad when day ends, as well as life, but that is just a part of it. Stevens makes the same point in "Waving Adieu, Adieu, Adieu":

> In a world without heaven to follow, the stops
> Would be endings, more poignant than partings,
> Profounder,
> And that would be saying farewell, repeating fare-
> Well,
> Just to be there and just to behold.

Without living life, one denies it, and in a "world without heaven" this attitude replaces a traditional religious attitude that would seek redemption after life: "One likes to practice the thing. They practice," "they" meaning traditional religious worshippers who practice too much for the poet to follow. What they practice in their holy rituals is too abstract to be fulfilling. "What is there

here but weather, what spirit / Have I except it comes from the sun?" Stevens asks defiantly, in defense of his earth-worship.

In "The Sun This March" the poet seeks solace from the sun because to behold nature is the only consolation in growing old. "Like an hallucination" in the corner of his eye, the poet says man is cold and death comes like "lions coming down." Nature is the rabbi who can heal the poet's soul as it grows old itself in nature. The poet begs her to be the scientist "of this dark nature." He implores her help in making the pains of aging less severe.

It is obvious that for Stevens, "it is in nature that man is closest to God," as William Burney puts it.[28] As the poet says in "Botanist on Alp (No. 1)":

> For myself, I live by leaves
> So that corridors of clouds,
> Corridors of cloudy thoughts,
> Seem pretty much one;
> I don't know what.

Whatever God is to Stevens, it is the universe itself which has a supernatural aura. If a "hotel is boarded and bare," what makes one sad on earth certainly is not "this ecstatic air." There are things in life that may disappoint, says the poet, but if one gets to that point, he should take a look around him and behold yet something else anew on the earth.

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[28]Burney, Wallace Stevens, p. 71.

"Botanist on Alp (No. 2)" adds its affirmation of a religion of the earth. In this poem the poet produces a pastoral setting in which crucifixes atop "convent roofs / gleam sharply as the sun comes up." They reflect earthly beauty under the sun and represent nothing more. As the poet says, what is below this beautiful scene "is in the past." In other words, so is any traditional religion that lies below these crosses on the roofs in the nunneries, or farther down below the Alps. "Like last night's crickets," the sounds of yesterday's religions are far away. They exist for the poet no more. God in his heaven does not come to mind as the poet beholds the Alps, for: ". . . What's above is in the past / As sure as all the angels are" as well. The poet continues his celebration of earth by saying that there is nothing more satisfying to the spirit than the Alps, and "Why should the future leap the clouds / The bays of heaven, brighted, blued?" In the next lines he urges those who might agree with him to sing their chants of the death of heaven's religions. A religion of heavenly abstracts is replaced by a devotion to the Alps, which are one of the highest of earth's icons: "For who could tolerate the earth / Without that poem," without gleaming crosses in the sunlight which are "A mirror of mere delight." To behold the earth in all its splendor and delight is the religion behind "the great poem."

In "Evening Without Angels" Stevens progresses to a religious celebration of the sensuous order, focusing upon man, especially the poet-man, ". . . as / Eternal chef d'orchestre." In this poem he notes that the sun, the world, all existence "was concoct" for man, not for angels. "Let this be clear that we are men of the sun," he says, who should worship the great source of life above all else. "Men never of pointed night," Stevens' men do not worship an unseen god, but instead, they worship the day. Stevens' are: "Men that repeat antiquest sounds of air / In an accord of repetitions." Again the poet acknowledges the sun as the center of what man should worship with nature, and he makes his celebration in the church of the world:

> Bare night is best. Bare earth is best. Bare, bare. . . .
> Where the voice that is in us makes a true re-
> Sponse,
> Where the voice that is great within us rises up,
> As we stand gazing at the rounded moon.

When he speaks of "us" Stevens is speaking of the reader, the "self" that is important in his poetry as interpreter of reality. As Frank Doggett says: "The idea of man, of the hero, of God--all are projections of self and examples of a spontaneous list of personification by which man continually interprets the world."[29] Doggett thus allows for another use of the God idea by Stevens, and an important one.

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[29]Doggett, Stevens' Poetry, p. 121.

A poem which locates faith in the world and in man is "Anecdote by Men of the Thousand," in which the poet opens with a discussion of the soul: "The soul, he said, is composed, / Of the external world." Faith in it surpasses any other thing assumed to be infinite: "There are men whose words / Are as natural sounds / Of their places," Stevens writes, thus fixing his value center in the natural, sensuous order.

Another poem which accomplishes the same purpose is "Cy Est Pourtraicte, Madame Ste Ursule, Et Les Unze Mille Vierges." This poem, however, introduces a new idea about God which Stevens does not mention often. Stevens is asking throughout the poem: "Could the heavenly Lord (of yesteryear) ever feel earthly love?":

> Ursula, in a garden, found
> A bed of radishes.
> She kneeled upon the ground
> And gathered them.

She tells her heavenly God about the lovely but ordinary flowers, "Marguerite and coquelicot, / And roses," which have already been placed upon his altar in the church, and she gives him more: ". . .'But here,' she said, / Where none can see," she makes her own "offering in the grass" with the vegetables and "unorthodox" wild flowers she has gathered. She then cries out of fear that her God, the one she hopes is like she thinks he is, would reject her trifling act. But God is touched by the nun's simplicity,

and "felt a subtle quiver, / That was not heavenly love, / Or pity." Like a poem of John Crowe Ransom ("Armageddon"), Stevens' poem here shows God as enjoying something earthly; in this case the gift of the nun's radishes. In Ransom's poem Christ jests with the devil (Antichrist) and feasts at his banquet. Christ is ashamed to find He enjoys it. A God of this type "is not writ / In any book," Stevens concludes, thus implying that such a God may yet be written--seen in human attributes.

"The great poem" so far has been illustrated as encompassing those poems written by Stevens in praise of the earth. More poems that fit into this category are those which deal primarily with death, a subject that cannot be omitted from "the great poem" because it is for Stevens a principle of the earth that "Death is the mother of beauty."

In "Of Heaven Considered as a Tomb" Stevens asserts a disbelief in the resurrection of the body and the soul after death: "What word have you, interpreters of men / Who in the tomb of heaven walk by night, / The darkened ghosts of our old comedy?" the poet inquires. In the poem he asks the so-called theologians ("interpreters") to whom they really think they are preaching of an afterlife, they "Who in the tomb of heaven walk by night," unable to give reasons for their beliefs. Stevens calls the men of the traditional church "darkened ghosts of our old comedy,"

implying that traditional religion is nothing more than simply a joke.

Another poem about death, "The Worms at Heaven's Gate," makes it clear that death is final. The poet sets the scene as a dead body, that of "Badroubadour," is brought from its grave. He points out what is left of the decayed body, now barely recognizable:

> Here is an eye, and here are, one by one,
> The lashes of that eye and its white lid.
> Here is the cheek on which that lid declined,
> And, finger after finger, here, the hand.

Only worms are at heaven's gate. Stevens believes that the death principle is interwoven into the principle of beauty, and that death is a creative and benign part of the life cycle.

In "Parochial Theme" Stevens again says death must play an important part in refurbishing the earth: Death is a holy thing, "this descant of a self, / This barbarous chanting of what is strong, this blare," he says. In the woods of the forest salvation exists, although there are some who ask how could it be: "Salvation here?" The poet replies that of course it can be found here, in the spring and in the autumn. In the last two lines the poet advises that if one has need of being assured of salvation--afterlife--he must employ his own imagination to determine what it is really like because there is none like life that man experiences on earth.

The idea of death, Stevens believes, is thus a good thing if viewed properly. Spring comes after fall and life is renewed, as can be seen clearly in the forest and its ways. The absoluteness of death is seen in "The Death of a Soldier," says Daniel Fuchs.[30] In the poem Stevens says: "Life contracts and death is expected, / As in a season of autumn. / The soldier falls." The poet compares death to the "season of autumn / When the wind stops."

Another example of a poem about death in "the great poem" is "Cortege for Rosenbloom," which Doggett says has "a mock-elegiac tone" and is a version of Thomas Hardy's "God's Funeral."[31] As this critic says, "Rosenbloom emerges as a rose in bloom of Christian symbolism and the cortege, like that of Hardy's 'slowly-stepping train,' is made up of the faithful who have lost faith. . . . [The poem] implies a diminished concept of God."[32] The poem is worth fuller inspection. It is somewhat confusing because it switches points of view three times. "Now the wry Rosenbloom is dead," the poet-narrator begins. Note the use of the word "wry." Rosenbloom was not worried in life and certainly is not worried in death about the saving graces that he might find in heaven after death. In the second line the point of view changes and Stevens presents the

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[30]Fuchs, The Comic Spirit, pp. 72-73.

[31]Doggett, Stevens' Poetry, p. 127.

[32]Ibid., pp. 126-127.

views of passers-by who might be watching the parade. As his "finical carriers tread" behind his funeral procession, Rosenbloom's mourners appear as "misanthropes . . . of nothingness," who have come to bury Rosenbloom. Contrary to Doggett's assumption that Rosenbloom is a symbol of decayed Christianity, he does not reflect religion of any sort. Rosenbloom, the "wry" fellow in life, was not a Christian, nor are his followers Christians who have fallen by the wayside. They are Stevens' followers who believe in "the emperor of ice cream" all the way. In the poem's final stanza the poet writes from the point of view of the procession's members. The group buries Rosenbloom in his tomb while they very cynically think that the Christians who are watching them will believe Rosenbloom has gone to that "place in the sky." What a "lamentable tread" Rosenbloom's mourners make, not because he has only gone to the earth, but because there are so many who do not understand what a joyous thing death can be. Rosenbloom will make the earth rich.

Burney says "The Men That Are Falling" is another poem about death.[33] It has these lines: "God and all angels sing the world to sleep, / Now that the moon is rising in the heat." Moon as imagination takes over the religion of God and his angels, who have literally bored the world. The poem includes a man who followed the old

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[33]Burney, Wallace Stevens, pp. 93-94.

religion of God and died for it: "God and all angels, this was his desire, / Whose head lies blurring here, for this he died." The man believed in the resurrection and Stevens once again says there is no such thing: "This death was his belief though death is a stone." The poet knows death is final and so pledges himself to the earth's crust forever: "This man loved earth, not heaven, enough to die."

At times, Stevens' theories of "religion" seem rather simple. Like most great poets, his basic ideas are few, his poetry in which he presents them complex. This is one reason critics delve so deeply into Stevens philosophically and theologically: because his simplistic, universal ideas apply to life so well that they feel he must have joined some particular school of thought. Stevens looks at life for answers to all of his questions, and finds them. Ignoring what others have said about the supreme creator before him, Stevens looks to his own perceptions to form his own sacred veneration of life. One of the final poems in the Ideas of Order illustrates once more the kind of thought most people give to religion. In "Winter Bells" Stevens says that the poem's hero "preferred the brightness of bells, / The mille fiori of vestments, / The voice of centuries," to the kind of religion Stevens advocates. One of these days, the Jew in the poem might think deeply, but it is easier to follow a faith already

established: "It was the custom" for the Jew in his "rage against chaos" to go to church and to worship "on the basis of propriety, / To be followed by a platter of capon!" However, he feebly resolved to remember the need for some heavy thinking:

> Yet he kept promising himself
> To go to Florida one of these days,
> And in one of the little arrondissements
> Of the sea there,
> To give this further thought.

Someday he might try to understand the majesty of the poem of earth and perhaps even write about it. Stevens' entire and impressive "Florida" imagery is designed to woo readers towards a more earthy faith. Stevens did go to Florida, and the ponderings are his deep south poems. The reason the poor man is unable to fathom deep ideas and make the move is because he cannot, as Stevens does, depend upon his imaginative resources to help him gain a comfortable ruminous empathy with the world.

The next set of poems to be discussed covers Stevens' idea of imagination as a visionary tool in perceiving the divine, though he never really tries to reject it. The poet never tries to take credit for creation, only for mirroring it in his poetry and valuing it.

Earth is forever, he says in "Fabliau of Florida," so men must make the best of it. He compares his life to a ship in a poem of beautiful imagery. He instructs man, the "Barque of phosphor on the palmy beach," to "Fill your

black hull" (his soul) "With white moonlight" of imagination, and to understand that one must make the most of life because: "There will never be an end / To this droning of the surf." Fill one's life with the imagination's wonders, the poet says, for that is the answer to making life worthwhile. The poem illustrates what Stevens does with his poetry which "approaches a religion," says Newton Stallknect,[34] although it is one completely divorced from tradition, as the poem "Another Weeping Woman" explains:

> The magnificent cause of being,
> The imagination, the one reality
> Leaves you
> With him for whom no phantasy moves,
> And you are pierced by a death.

When a poem leaves the world of the imagination to find answers in the Christian way it is death, a death of imagination and intellect. Stevens, of course, is not the only thinker to believe that an anti-Christ is right in the center of Christian attitudes.

Several critics discuss the meaning of "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman," a key poem. Frank Kermode says the poem is about a widow who "has allowed her imagination to go to heaven with her husband, and needs to be told the truth."[35] He says this truth is: "Poetry is the supreme

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[34]Newton P. Stallknect, "Absence in Reality," Kenyon Review, XXI (Spring, 1959), 545.

[35]Frank Kermode, Wallace Stevens (New York: Grove Press, 1961), p. 38.

fiction, madame. / Take the moral law and make a nave of it / And from the nave build a haunted heaven." To Daniel Fuchs the poem is a joking one on the supreme fiction in which Stevens "contrasts the old with the new, the moral fictions of religion with the new fictions of poetry."[36] The jesting lines in the poem are these:

> Your disaffected flagellants, well-stuffed,
> Smacking their muzzy bellies in parade,
> Proud of such novelties of the sublime,
> Such tink and tank and tunk-a-tunk-tunk
> May, merely may, madame, whip from themselves
> A jovial hullabaloo among the spheres. . . .
> But fictive things
> Wink as they will. Wink most when widows wince.

The poem according to Fuchs's interpretation illustrates the poet's concern with the imagination as it creates "the great poem." The critics do not pay close enough attention to the specific claims in this poem. They seem to ignore the key adjective "most," which indicates that a widow's removal from carnal pleasure makes her most absurd in the eyes of the possible angelic host.

The imagination can eliminate sadness, as in "Lunar Paraphrase," a poem about the powers of the imagination depicted by the moon: "The moon is the mother of pathos and pity," he says in the opening line of the poem. That it helps to use one's imagination is what Stevens is saying again with his moon imagery.

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[36]Fuchs, The Comic Spirit, p. 80.

One of the poet's most important poems of the imagination as creative instrument is "The Man with the Blue Guitar." In this poem Stevens says there are those who say to him: "Play a tune beyond us, yet ourselves," to which the poet replies that he cannot duplicate the present world, but his poetry, in effect, can "patch it" very nicely. The imagination can transform the world into a happy realm, however, and "things as they are" can be changed by using one's mental powers. Another thing also: "Poetry / Exceeding music must take the place / Of empty heaven and its hymns," if the poetry is accompanied by the blue guitar. Stevens reiterates that man's imagination is important in forming his own spiritual salvation, and that spirit world must be centered in the low order of sensuous things: "Speak of the soul, the mind. It is / An animal." The blue guitar becomes "a substitute for all the gods: / This self, not that gold self aloft," and replaces the old religions with a new tune, man-made. That man reigns supreme "without magnificence" is Stevens' idea of a new holiness.

In "Prelude to Objects" the poetic imagination is the only salvation: "He will be heaven after death," says the poet, and homage belongs to the man who can use his imaginative faculties. The poet shapes his world and his readers by imagination, creating a new sacred order of emotion.

It seems that the latter half of The Collected Poems gives more attention to the role of the imagination, the first part being more devoted to Stevens' appreciations of the sensuous order. Now, having created poems of the earth, he turns inward to make of them what he wishes life to be. A poem such as "The Man on the Dump" takes place with a man sitting among garbage imagining a better world. Using his imagination "One feels the purifying change" that overcomes him when he refuses to let the trash be the only thing he sees in his midst. "That's the moment when the moon creeps up / To a bubbling of bassoons" and the imagination is working properly. Stevens goes on to use the example of the man looking "at the elephant-colorings of tires" and imagining they are something different. The man is seeing a world of his own on the dump and the poet says of the hero who is beating on an old tin can: "One beats and beats for that which one believes." One must, according to Stevens, believe in his own resources and abilities to view the world.

The poem asks: "Is it a philosopher's honeymoon, one finds on the dump?" To Stevens, yes, because he can turn it into something better through the use of his imagination. What he can do with it is further illustrated in "Connoisseur of Chaos," in which the "pensive man" perceives ". . . that eagle float / For which the intricate alps are a single nest." The powers of the mind thus are

unlimited. Such powers can produce

> The great poem of winter, the man,
> Who, to find what will suffice,
> Destroys romantic tenements
> Of rose and ice.

In "Of Modern Poetry" the mind is the great master over life: "The poem of the mind in the act of finding what will suffice." In "Les Plus Belles Pages," the imaginative man is as a god, the poet says, even admitting that "I changed the word to man." In "Asides on the Oboe" the poet offers the idea that belief "Must be in fiction," for as he says in "Holiday in Reality": "After all, they knew that to be real each had / To find for himself his earth, his sky, his sea."

An important decision occurs in "A Pastoral Nun": "Finally, in the last years of her age, / Having attained a present blessedness, / She said poetry and apotheosis are one." After living all her life she comes around to Stevens' way of thinking, seeing that "Each matters only in that which it conceives." Finally, in a "Reply to Papini," the poet says the imagination is a spiritual force with power. In this poem Stevens says "the great poem" is "the growth of the mind / Of the world, the heroic effort to live expressed / As victory." It is a product of his spiritual power and is his only salvation in the world.

This chapter briefly has discussed the idea of "the great poem of the earth" and the more or less religious

function of the imagination in forming it. Stevens, reviewing an essay written by a good friend (Santayana) on the subject of religion and poetry, illustrates further some of his views on the deity:

> Whether or not the ideal exists as a matter of fact is utterly irrelevant. That it exists as a matter of value is enough for the religious consciousness. The individual ideal self for instance by which we all measure our ideals, may or may not be conceived by us, so far as its practical value is concerned, as embodied in some Divine self; its mere existence as a concept of our thought is sufficient to make it a valid criterion and end of moral action. In like manner, God may or may not exist as an independent absolute "thing," an object, so to speak, for scientific exploration. He assuredly exists as a necessary postulate of the poetic imagination, embodying in concrete form the perfected projection of life, which alone can satisfy the will.[37]

Stevens does, then, offer clues as to just how he conceives of God in relation to the imagination. To use one's intellectual powers to the fullest is an attempt to be the perfect man, especially if one's thoughts lead to moral action. The universe is so sacred and spiritual as to promote such attitudes. That God is anything else than an idea to focus such attitudes is unimportant to Stevens. In "the great poem of the earth," the poet is the interior paramour. He loves his planet more than any celestial abstract. Nothing compels his love like the earth and no orthodox

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[37]Stevens, a review of George Santayana's "Poetry and Religion," an essay which appeared anonymously reviewed in The Harvard Advocate, as quoted in Wallace Stevens: Poetry as Life by Samuel French Morse.

religion can make him a better person than his own aesthetic values can make him. The new religious man must simply seek out the light of the world in terms of self and the world as met. Some influences from philosophy and theology surely affect Stevens, but they are really unnecessary to come to an understanding of how he conceives of his god. His poems tell the story quite clearly. In fact, in a letter to Henry Church, he almost leads one to believe he would dispute any influences critics may suggest.[38]

This chapter opened with a quotation from Friedrich Nietzsche, whose theories perhaps led him to insanity. Stevens' life, religion, and theory of beauty rest also on anti-theory, as he explains in a remark about Nietzsche:

> Both of us must often have felt how a strong mind distorts the world. Nietzsche's mind was a perfect example of that sort of thing. . . . Nietzsche is as perfect a means of getting out of focus as a little bit too much to drink.[39]

Like the madman's, perhaps Stevens' time has not come yet. On the other hand, he speaks to a generation of restless people who are finding decreasing amounts of solace from organized religions. Stevens' ideas are detrimental to the revitalization of organized religions in one sense, and in another, are ecumenical. A true world religion is the message he preaches, where the greatest of all virtues

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[38]Stevens, letter to Henry Church, Dec. 8, 1942, in The Letters, pp. 431-432.

[39]Ibid.

simply is an individual and spontaneous love for the earth, and an awareness that imagined secular idealisms can carry the same force as any conventional religious hypotheses.

CHAPTER III

LOVE IN "THE GREAT POEM"

It is not uncommon to find that critics of Wallace Stevens have omitted any mention of the word "love" in connection with his poetry. And yet it is essentially what the first two chapters of this study have implied. The sensuous order means something in relation to Stevens' poetry as it serves as a framework for his subjects. His religious convictions are centered quite simply on his love for the earth. It is possible to take this feeling one step farther to relate his theories of love to the sensuous order and to his religious theory.

It has been unfortunate for critics of Stevens' poetry to overlook a theme of love in his works, since the theme is of major importance in his entire vision of physical and spiritual reality. Perhaps the theme is too obvious; it certainly is not obscure. This chapter intends to show that love is behind all of "the great poems" of the earth that Stevens has written.

The times may be to blame for inhibiting critics from discussing the subject of love, an idealistic term in a cynical age. But Stevens was not inhibited. In a

sense, Stevens has tilled new ground in love poetry, for in his poetic world he uses the term in many ways. The poems discussed so far reveal a man who is bursting first with joy of the world. Things are experienced by the senses, and as the world moves from season to season, Stevens does not concern himself so much with issues, but rather with sensations--feelings that express love for many things--the world, his poetry about it, and women. This chapter is an effort to explain how all three are linked in Stevens' love themes.

Stevens writes in his Journal in 1899 that life must be more than simply a street between the stars, and that if one is going to write poetry, there must be something with great meaning behind it. In his case, it is a theme of love, for he says: "Art--art all alone, detached, sensuous for the sake of sensuousness, but not to perpetuate inspiration or thought, art that is mere art--seems to me to be the most arrant as it is the most inexcusable rubbish."[1] Thus he sees art as serving ends higher than the mere esthetic. Love is part of such higher intent. By using sensuous objects, he sets up a frame of reference in which the love theme operates in many poems, even though it is not often the chief direct subject of his poetry. As he

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[1]Stevens, from his Journal, March 28, 1899, in The Letters, p. 24.

is unconventional in stating his religious ideas, so he is with his thoughts on love. It can be approached in Stevens' poetry in three different categories.

First, there are the poems in which Stevens talks about love in general. Technically, these may be labeled the poems about his "theory." Unfortunately they are few. Second, Stevens in several poems connects love with nature, especially with the season of spring, and love for the earth is seen in "the great poems." Although he is a poet of all seasons, it is particularly in the poems which discuss the first season in the life cycle that his love theme shows through. Often spring is compared with a woman. Finally, there are some specific poems about love between the sexes.

The first group of poems in which love in general is treated is quite important. The poem "Homunculus Et La Belle Étoile" clarifies the theory of love as it appears in Stevens' poetry. The subject of the nine-stanza poem is the poet's meditation on a star and how it affects the different people discussed who are observing the celestial decoration. Love becomes the poet's subsidiary subject because thoughts of love are initiated by the star that is talked about first. The star as a subject has often been associated with love themes in poetry, as it is here. The star in the opening stanza is "good light for drunkards, poets, widows, and ladies soon to be married." It guides

them all, not necessarily by its light, but by the way in which it draws out the characters' feelings.

In the first three stanzas Stevens shows that these people are susceptible to great emotional states and can be taken easily by the charms of the "emerald star: This light conducts / The thoughts of drunkards, the feelings / Of widows and trembling ladies." As seen in the fourth stanza, it also touches others. The poet notes that philosophers at times are also reminded of such unscholarly thoughts as love, and they can be affected by the star's romantic and tantalizing undulations in the sky. Such feelings cannot be evoked by textbooks. Stevens chides these scholars for a moment because he says they too often attempt to ignore the fact that such a beautiful thing as a star, which stirs the most natural feelings and thoughts, could, in turn, inspire them to write about it. If it does not do so, Stevens says:

> It is better that, as scholars,
> They should think hard in the dark cuffs
> Of voluminous cloaks,
> And shave their heads and bodies.

In other words, if their being captured momentarily by the beauty of a star results in a powerful poem or philosophical treatise which "Might come in the simplest of speech," Stevens says the time spent star-gazing is certainly worthwhile. And this is the underlying meaning of the poem: Poetry <u>about</u> it (the "ultimate Plato") is almost better than looking at the star itself, at least for Stevens.

Poetry alleviates, as he says in the final line of the poem, "the torments of confusion" wrought in the minds of the star's beholders. That emotion and love are good things because they can ultimately lead to poetry is what Stevens is saying. And of course it is true that much of the actuality of love has been wrought by imaginative literature. This major truth about love is in the poem.

Another poem, "Men Made Out of Words," though very short, is written expressly to state some aspects of the poet's love theory. The poem encompasses ten lines, and in the first couplet the poet asks: "What should we be without the sexual myth, / The human revery or poem of death?" In this important couplet he is making the point very clear that it is his duty and joy as a poet to record such things as love and death, repeated over and over again. Life depends upon "propositions about life," he says in the second couplet, and he means by this line that other men (like the unimaginative group discussed in Chapter II) often depend upon words about life (whether poems or prose) in order to find a basis for their own existences. They need the poet who writes about love to be assured that people generally feel the same on this most universal matter. In the third and fourth couplets, the poet explains again that in "human revery" the poet takes the defeats and the dreams one has in life and records them in poetry. He is not merely recording his original thoughts and

feelings, but those which the earth brings to mind, as he says in the final lines: "The whole race is a poet that writes down / The eccentric propositions of its fate." Stevens here includes all facets of life that come to mind when the poet writes, but he begins the poem with the most important one man experiences: "the sexual myth." Although he does not explore it in this poem, he is saying it must be explored. The poem is an explicit declaration that love is an essential theme in his poetry, which is certainly not detached and esthetically "pure." It is important to note that the sexual myth as poetic subject is placed as high as poems of reverie and death. Stevens could hardly believe this without giving the love theme a careful treatment.

A third poem of love theory is "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," parts I and III. Here Stevens renders some impressive lines about love. The work is dedicated to Henry Church, a friend. However, the prefatory eight lines also could be addressed to any loved one or could be about poetry itself. He begins:

> And for what, except for you, do I feel love? . . .
> For a moment in the central of our being,
> The vivid transparence that you bring is peace.

In this poem, in which he goes to great lengths to prove that poetry is "the supreme fiction," the most exalted of man-made artistic creations, Stevens puts the love theme at the very beginning. This is really more important than

many of his critics perceive. It enhances the love theme in his poetry each time he uses it in conjunction with other profound content.

In part I, Stevens, as far as subject matter goes, instructs the muses to try to see with him through his "invented world" of poetry. He is asking this of the reader as well. He asks him to forget the world he lives in and enter the poetic world as he has created it, "And see it clearly in the idea of it." It is inviting the reader to take with Stevens a tour into his world and learn how to see life through the poetic lover's eye. In part III, which is of special interest, Stevens talks about how the medium of poetry allows the reader to take stock of his ideas and perhaps approach things such as love from a different point of view. He says: "The poem refreshes life so that we share, / For a moment, the first idea. . . . It satisfies belief in an immaculate beginning." To understand how this fits into Stevens' theory of love, one must keep in mind his opening remarks to Church. "The vivid transparence" of "you" is what compels him to write the poem; in this case, "you" is Stevens' friend, Church. Without his inspiration, the poem would mean nothing. Without human feeling or earthly inspiration, none of the supreme fictions would mean anything. Stevens' poems often reach out, like this one, to seek a companion with whom he can share his invented world, for he is certainly not a poet in

isolation, and the affective love feelings are at the center of the sharing.

This idea is repeated in "A Primitive Like an Orb," in which Stevens describes the poem as "the centre of things." It has great power to reflect human existence. "We do not prove the existence of a poem," he says, however, because a poem is merely the tool by which the poet reflects the real world which he sees. Poets, whom he calls "clairvoyant men," do not have to have proof for what a poem says because they see and understand clearly its function as an individual and separate creation. Others who have this clairvoyance are "the lover, [and] the believer." Thus Stevens shows that the mode of loving is an analogue to the poetic process. In the same section Stevens continues to say that if they (the clairvoyant men) are poets such as he, "Their words are chosen out of their desire" to express whatever emotion it is that needs to be expressed. In sections V and VI, the poet chooses to use words usually associated with love to describe how poetry and life are wed, and how they have such great need of the other. He says: "It is as if the central poem became the world, / And the world the central poem, each one the mate." In the final stanza, he reminds the reader that above all things, it is he the lover who writes a poem, while the poet in him only "mumbles" what is in his heart that must be expressed. As he says: "That's it. The lover writes,

the believer hears, / The poet mumbles and the painter sees." Both love and poetry are raised high by the key idea Stevens expresses: that poetry and the world must be espoused in the same modality of desire that lovers embody. Love is not only a major theme in the general theoretic poems, but is also a major metaphor for poetry.

"Arrival at the Waldorf" is another poem that illustrates the wildness and splendor of poetry as analogous to the satisfactions of love. In this poem Stevens shows that if one cannot have love, he can at least satisfy himself temporarily by use of his imagination. This poem is about the return of a man from Guatemala (possibly a soldier) and he has left there some happy memories of love. Now in the hotel where he is staying he is alone and must recreate his experiences in his mind. The poem's hero must now live "in the wild country of the soul . . . / Where the wild poem is a substitute / For the woman one loves or ought to love."

Another aspect of the love theme is seen in key poems about nature. "In the Carolinas" is a good example of this type of poem. The season of spring, and nature in general, displays a loving warmth in the first season in the yearly cycle. The poem's message is rather simple: the earth is well into the season of spring as the first flowers, lilacs, have already faded, and the poet feels a pleasant, childlike security in the bosom of an earth

that is projecting love. As Stevens says of poets and those who feel like this in the spring: "Already the newborn children interpret love / In the voices of mothers." He addresses nature herself in the poem, marveling that the earth just last winter had "aspic nipples," referring to the cold, bitter, biting weather. In the poem he asks: "How is it that your aspic nipples / For once vent honey?" Stevens is not looking for an answer. He is simply saying that the season with its "pine tree sweetens my body / The white iris beautifies me." This poem is an obvious example of Stevens' love theory in that it is simply an assertion of the joy he finds in the procreative season of spring. It is a tribute to the powers of love and need and satisfaction that so strongly mark both nature and man.

"Meditation Celestial and Terrestrial" incorporates Stevens' love theory in much the same way as does "In the Carolinas." This poem is also concerned with how the changing of the seasons affects the poet's mind, turning it to channels of love. The poem opens with a statement by the poet that reveals his happiness with the coming of spring and "of our returning sun." He talks about the winter which has passed, the season in which feelings of love are difficult because of the coldness of the season. He uses the symbols of wind and frost to explain how the season of winter (which can mean figuratively the time a lover spends

without love until he finds the right person) had found him in the meantime "to live by bluest reason." But now, with the coming of spring, things are different. Through the lover's eyes (speaking here of the poet as earth-worshipper again) the trees have become "hilarious" and the earth has become "the drunken mother," careening with her liquid lusciousness that the poet has also imbibed. The juices of need and desire and procreation create a common ground between nature and man, a bond of love.

These two peoms use Stevens' love theory in speaking primarily about the earth as mother. In another poem about spring, "Ghosts as Cocoons," nature is referred to as the bride, again emphasizing Stevens' love theory as it is seen in the first season in the cycle. In this poem the poet is anxious for spring to arrive, like a bridegroom waiting for his bride. In summary, the poem says that "the grass is in seed," meaning the earth is now ready for the advent of spring. The poet is wanting it to come because when the bride spring comes, things waiting to be born, such as flowers, buds on trees, the grass, will have a mother who can give them birth. Everyone in the poem is waiting for spring, for "Those to be born have need of the bride." In the last lines the poet asks her to hurry as he says: "Come now, pearled and pasted, bloomy-leafed, / While the domes resound with chant involving chant." The poet lover once again celebrates the earth in a wedding poem that draws its imagery from sexual love and relates

love to nature. Perhaps many modern critics choose to minimize these treatments of love because they are looking so hard for content less conventional than this.

"Credences of Summer" represents the culmination of what the poet seeks in "Ghosts." It is midsummer in this poem. In part I the poet is satisfied with the feelings summer elicits from him. The poet lover is happy. This is his time. His mind is in season, for nothing is interfering with his tranquility. Therefore, the imagination is free for full fruition. Time is momentarily stopped, and this section brings to the reader a picture of slow, perhaps southern-style summery leisure in which "these fathers standing round, / These mothers touching, speaking, being near, / These lovers waiting in the soft dry grass" are at peace. The title hints that the poem is intended to be a kind of tableau which presents an over-all picture of summer. In the last line of the poem, Stevens invites the reader to explore with him the various ways in which this season can be fulfilling, but each must see it in his own way. As he says: "Each matters only in that which it conceives." The poem fits into his love poems because it records the poet's contentment with the season of "happiest folk-land, mostly marriage-hymns," about which he speaks in part II.

"Montrachet-Le-Jardin" is also a poetic and romantic affirmation of Stevens' devotion to the earth, again a

celebration of nature in the language of love. This is a long poem in which the poet catalogues all of the things he would see in the Garden of Montrachet in France. Of course, this particular garden serves only as an example of earth in general. "What more is there to love than I have loved?" he asks, meaning everything in nature seen in this garden. Some of these things pointed out in this poem are animals, the elements of the earth, and "life's latest, thousand senses." These are the things that will last forever to be loved. The poet implies that daily he must renew his love for all of these things, because, like traditional religion, "What good were yesterday's devotions?" Love must be carried into every new day, he says. Stevens sees love as the very condition of day-to-day satisfaction, the "sine qua non"--whether his sophisticated critics choose to see it or not.

"Yellow Afternoon" supports the notion that love must be renewed. The poem explains that the earth was intended for poets such as he to love. In short, the poem shows how the earth has in it everything for a poet to adore and to write about. In turn, the poet is fulfilling his purpose by finding and sharing love. The poet says: "It was in the earth only / That he was at the bottom of things / And of himself." Understanding one's place in the order of things allows a reaching out to others. "He said I had this that I could love," the poet says, meaning that the

world is a love object. Again he professes an affection for the earth when he says: "The odor / Of earth penetrates more deeply than any word. / There he touches his being." It is obvious that Stevens sees love of the earth as a major catalyst in understanding self in relation to reality.

"The Paltry Nude Starts on a Spring Voyage" indicates to the reader at first glance that this poem should be grouped with those that deal with the spring season. However, there really is very little in the poem about the season itself, but much about the poet's love theory as it is related to nature in general. It also is a good transitional work to lead into the poems that have as their themes the sexual love between man and woman. "The Paltry Nude" is one of the first of many poems in which woman is a metaphor for the land. She is the seashore in this piece, a descriptive study of how the landscape can evoke the image of a woman in the poet's mind. The poem is strongly suggestive and sensual. It consists of five short stanzas. In the first, Stevens describes earth as a lovely woman who moves toward the sea, which in turn covers her nudity. In the next verse Stevens talks about how the shore is eager to accept "the purple stuff upon her arms," debris that acts as clothing over the shore. The seashore welcomes "the brine and bellowing" that washes upon her like a lover close upon her body, moving back and forth. The image of

mother earth is absent from this poem. Here she is a sexual lover. In the third stanza Stevens pictures her as one would imagine a woman again on the beach, wet, with the wind blowing over her body. The seashore surrounds the sea and Stevens says: "She touches the clouds, where she goes / In the circle of her traverse of the sea." As far as eye can see, the shore looks as if it meets the sky far off in the distance. The poem's purpose is to compare the earth (which the poet clearly adores) with an attractive woman. The theme of the poem is his love for both.

"The Woman in Sunshine" serves the same purpose as "The Paltry Nude." Here Stevens again draws a picture of a woman to associate her beauty with that of the earth. It is a beautiful love and nature poem. He describes the elements of the earth and their movements, which are much the same as a woman's. This poem, like "The Paltry Nude," is most sensual in its description of the earth as a woman. The poem shows that earth, portrayed as a woman, is his first love over anything or anyone in particular. These associations that the poet makes of the earth with the female must not be overlooked, for they represent a large chain of analogy throughout much of his poetry that constitutes an important aspect of his love theme. Stevens makes it clear to the world that the sensual splendor of woman is to be highly valued.

"Infanta Marina" portrays the earth again as a woman figure. In this poem she is a steady and patient woman for the poet to come home to. Stevens presents the seashore with its terrace of sand, palm and twilight waving like the fan of a composed southern lady. He compares the "rumpling" of her "plumes" to the sails of ships, popping in the evening wind. She is so calm that in the evening she beckons to the ships to gather at her feet. This poem, like others about the woman as earth, has no real story to tell. It is finely impressionistic in its attempt to call up mental pictures of earth as a mother and lover.

"O Florida, Venereal Soil" is among the important poems that envision Florida as a powerfully desired sensuous woman. Eugene Nassar observes that she is one "that will not be denied."[2] In this poem Stevens presents again some very suggestive imagery. Stevens often vacationed in Florida, seeking refuge there from the business world with which he was associated daily. This poem illustrates his feelings for the resort area which affords him escape, and he presents Florida as a lover who comes "tormenting" and "insatiable" to him at night. In the last stanza of the poem he pictures the state in the evening as "stooping in indigo gown" and begs her to either "conceal yourself or disclose / Fewest things to the lover." By honoring

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[2]Nassar, An Anatomy, p. 134.

Florida with such sexual logic, Stevens reveals also the high value again of the sexual bounty of woman.

"Farewell to Florida" is a poem which records the poet's feelings as he leaves the state. It fits into these love poems because it implicates the departure of a lover from his loved one. Stevens does not want to leave, and there is a tone of sadness in this poem. "I am free," he says in a regretful tone, as he continues to describe how difficult it is to leave Florida's hot palms and her charms that have so captured him. In this meditative poem he tries to convince himself that when he gets home to Hartford in the north, perhaps he can forget "her south of pine and coral." He reminisces about her home "in the ever-freshened Keys." Leaving his favorite spot is like leaving a loved one, as he says in these lines:

> To stand here on the deck in the dark and say
> Farewell and to know that that land is forever gone
> And that she will not follow in any word
> Or look, nor ever again in thought except
> That I loved her once . . . Farewell . . .

The imagery here clearly rests upon the love theme, and all the allure of Florida is conveyed in the language of love.

These representative poems linking love of earth to love of woman may be seen as transitional towards his more overt poems about love between the sexes.

Love as a subject in his poetry goes back to Stevens' earliest work. In a letter written to Elsie Moll around 1906 there are indications that Stevens had a collection

of love poems to his future wife entitled "Songs for Elsie." One of these poems is included in the letter and shows probably why Stevens' "songs" were never published. The first four lines read:

> If I love thee, I am thine;
> But if I love thee not,
> Or but a little--let the sun still shine
> On palaces forgot. . . .[3]

Fortunately, the love theme in the works that have been published is much more mature and not so personal.

"Peter Quince at the Clavier" is one of the most important evidences of the love theme in the work of Stevens. The poem involves a man thinking of his absent beloved and desiring her, and then thinking of the biblical story of Susanna and the Elders as a parable of the power of lust and of the sensual basis for all beauty. As they watch her bathe, Stevens says: "The basses of their beings throb" as Susanna arises from the water, and "Upon the bank, she stood / In the cool / Of spent emotions." The poem's purpose is to show that the sensuous body of woman, as an object of desire, becomes a proof of the larger metaphysical claim that beauty can only exist in sensuous forms, which are more primary than Platonic abstractions. Stevens' theory of love and beauty parallel his theory of religion, which can also be seen in this poem. He takes an Old

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[3]Stevens, letter to Elsie Moll, 1906-1907, in The Letters, p. 74.

Testament story and turns it into a purely human and sensual document in "sacramental praise" of beauty.

"Jasmine's Beautiful Thoughts Underneath the Willow," another overt love poem, shows that Stevens shrewdly objects to the conventional ways in which love is expressed: the simple-mindedness and cheap ornamentation by which men of poor sensibility indicate their passions. When Stevens calls for love, he is asking for a radically new and superior kind of lover, which he describes in this poem. The poem calls for men to express their love more like fugues and chorals; these are more subtle and complex than conventional love tokens, which are often "frizzled, flambeaued." Fugues and chorals are high and austere, expert and finished musical forms, and love should be equally as complex, he says.

Stevens' theories of love say that when it comes to man and woman, a superior type of expression must be executed if it is to have fullest meaning. The imagination certainly plays a role in Stevens' love theory, as it is the imaginative man who can express his love in a higher manner than can the ordinary man. In the two poems discussed above, Stevens shows how lovers must make most of the imaginative resources to obtain the fullest satisfaction from the love experience. Stevens sheds more light on his conception of love as real and imagined in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven." He claims that: "And next to love

is the desire for love, / The desire for its celestial ease in the heart, / Which nothing can frustrate." The desire is there, but still secondary to the genuine experience.

In the long and complex "The Comedian as the Letter C," Crispin, in his poetic journey, comes to the conclusion that love and marriage are a necessary part of life. In the section "Approaching Carolina," Richard Allen Blessing says Crispin discovers that there are many things in life yet to experience, and he becomes humble.[4] Up to this section, the "Comedian" traces the poetic journey of a Crispin who has believed that man needs nothing but his intelligence to make him superior over his soil. In this section, however, he finds that he cannot exist alone, but would be better off with someone to share his world. He is ready at last to form a colony and make a home, to which he takes a wife and has "Daughters with curls." Stevens says in this poem that marriage is an essential experience not only for men in general, but for poets also.

The imagination plays a great role in "Bouquet of Belle Scavoir," a work which is a reflective poem about a man who is thinking about an imaginary love. In this case, the imagination can soothe the lover who has no

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[4]Richard Allen Blessing, Wallace Stevens' "Whole Harmonium" (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1970), pp. 20-21.

object for his desire. In the opening stanza the poem's hero is gazing at a rose which represents to him what love is. It calls to mind all that he would like to see in his future lover whom he as yet does not know. "Everything in it is herself," he says about the rose, meaning that its beauty, delicacy, scent, color, and form all represent what he wants his lover to be. Stevens goes on in the poem to say that the man had walked and thought of this imaginary love often, and that the man was "miserable that it was not she." The rose is not sufficient to satisfy his needs. Thinking of someone with no name "is not enough," the poet says, as the poem's hero would rather have his love in reality: "To look at directly, / Someone before him to serve and know." The poem is quite clearly a love poem about a man and a love which he has not yet found. However, he can be momentarily contented, even in his misery, if he relies upon earth's objects of beauty such as the rose, and his imagination. But these cannot be a sufficient substitute for authentic love.

Love and marriage are also directly treated in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," part IV. In this section Stevens tells the story of a "great captain and the maiden Bawda" who marry, and in part IX of this same poem he explains their action: "The romantic intoning, the declaimed clairvoyance / Are parts of apotheosis" as well as poetry.

Marriage is a necessary act with a mode of transcendence similar to that of poetry. A full and adequate love theme, Stevens implies, must be part of any "supreme fiction."

Several of Stevens' poems deal very clearly with relationships of young lovers. One is "Dezembrum," a five-stanza poem about a special evening for two lovers. The poem gives the impression that the two are together in a room while outside the world is going on. There are plenty of things to do outside, plenty of things to fill "the imagination's need," but there is nothing like what they have inside. The poem says that the most important thing is love: "In this rigid room, an intenser love," is waiting and there is nothing in the world greater than "the response to desire."

A second poem specifically about two lovers is "Two at Norfolk," a somewhat macabre poem in that the themes of love and death are woven into the poem. Stevens treats two lovers who meet in a graveyard where their parents lie buried in a southern picture with darkies mowing around the graves. The parents of the two lovers lie buried side by side, and the lovers become acquainted as they visit their parents' tombs. Both parents never felt love like

these young people. For the dead father, "His daughter was a foreign thing," and he "was never a man of heart." But Jamanda and Carlotta meet at their parents' tombs "beneath the myrtles / . . . He for her burning breast and she for his arms." Stevens does not neglect to mention that they "would touch each other, even touching closely, / Without an escape in the lapses of their kisses." Stevens is probably saying that earthly love is a valuable thing, for after death there is no loving. Love is a magnificent end in itself in a sensuous order available for a limited time only.

"Gallant Chateau" is an interesting poem of frustration in love. The man treated has been unsuccessful in love and must go home to an empty bed. However, he tries to convince himself that going home to an empty bed is better than going to one in which "Bitter eyes, hands and hostile and cold" await him. In this poem Stevens refutes a rather popular idea in today's society that a bad love is better than no love. To be in bed alone is more desirable than being with a cold partner, for "There might have been immense solitude / Of wind upon the curtains." The poem observes that "It is good. The bed is empty, / The curtains are stiff and prim and still." Stevens is certainly no spokesman for casual and unsatisfying love relations, claiming that solitude is better than poor love.

Frustration in love is seen in "Two Figures in a Dense Violet Night." In this poem the poet is a lover who is dissatisfied with his mate because she is obviously ignoring his attempts to make love. In the opening lines he complains that he might as well be hugging "the porter at the hotel / As to get no more from the moonlight / Than your moist hand." The poet implores her to be a little more like "Florida in my ear." The poem's hero wants his companion to be more sensual, to use "dusky words and dusky images." Stevens goes on in the poem to describe the perfect evening for love, even though it is not progressing as it should. This is a rather humorous and light poem which mirrors how all lovers feel at one time or another, and is an effective suggestion that too many lovers do not play the game with the needed skills.

Finally, "The World as Meditation" is still another example of Stevens' specific treatment of lovers; in this case Ulysses' return to Penelope. In brief, she has awaited him for a long time, and in her meditation, she keeps imagining he is coming, and yet he has not returned. The poem is about the impressive patience possible in love. It comes to those who wait. In the poem, Penelope thinks Ulysses is coming, but it is only her imagination. However, she continues to await him. Stevens says that Penelope:

> Wanted nothing he could not bring her by coming alone.
> She wanted no fetchings. His arms would be her necklace
> And her belt, the final fortune of their desire.

In these lines Stevens points out the importance of love above all else in the world, seeing it as treasure of treasures and fortune of fortunes. Meanwhile, the poet says:

> She would talk a little to herself as she combed
> her hair
> Repeating his name with its patient syllables,
> Never forgetting him that kept coming constantly
> so near.

Stevens here shows that memory and desire can help keep a love alive and at a high plane of spiritual fidelity. This is one of the best love poems in the English language.

The love theme, then, along with the unique handling of spiritual matters, must be seen as highly significant in the poems of Stevens, and both concerns need more attention by his critics.

The element of faith in Stevens, as Chapter II indicated, rests on the premise that God is certainly not dead. He is simply to Stevens "One with the imagination," a theory which defies religious orthodoxy but which represents a sacred worship of creation through a secular approach. "The great poems," those in which these thoughts are evident, are the means by which Stevens worships God--unconventional perhaps--but hardly atheistic when one recalls Emily Dickinson of a century past who loved God through nature first.

Because he questioned whether the sun was "concoct for angels or for men," Stevens has undergone severe

criticism as an atheist. All he was merely doing was reaffirming his faith in God and creation by exploiting the earth and putting it in the highest form of expression he knew: poetry.

In treating love, Stevens again puts the theme in his "great poems" of the earth. The poems discussed in this third chapter have attempted to show that such attitudes reflected in the second chapter must also encompass a greater emotion in Stevens' poetry--that of love. Love is high and austere to Stevens, and as he believed the imaginative man could make the most of religion, so this chapter has proven that it is the imaginative man who can express his love in a higher manner than can the ordinary man, sometimes sacrificing the "sacred" in the religious sense to use sensual and exotic imagery. This is to show again his devotion to the earth, though he always kept in mind that such treatment is only to praise its beauty as created, and by a higher authority. When "God and the imagination are one," the poet can use what might appear to be a secular frame of reference such as the sensuous order as it was discussed in Chapter I, but the ideas of love found in the poems preceding prove that Stevens does not ignore God.

The sensuous order, faith of a special sort, and the love theme are as pervasive in Stevens' poetry as the drawing rooms and elegant ladies are of Henry James'

writings, and one considered without the other would be like considering Stevens' uncle without his monocle.

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